Amy Sterling Casil: Mad for the Mints

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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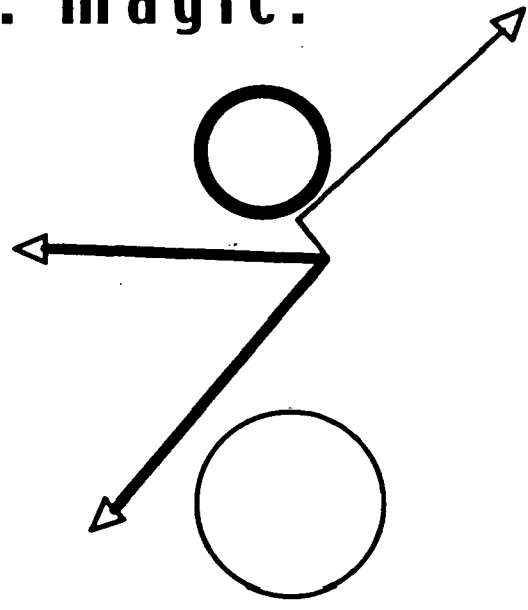

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Amy Casil reports that her first short-story collection, Without Absolution, *should be available from the Wildside Press by the time this issue comes off the presses. Her new story for us takes us back to eighteenth-century England. King George III is remembered here in the colonies primarily as the madman on the throne during the American Revolution. But did you know that those unrepresented taxes he claimed helped support the arts and sciences? In fact, George III fathered modern astronomy by aiding pioneers like William Herschel and James Ferguson with royal stipends. (The seventh planet was initially named* Georgium Sidus*—George's Star. King George continued Herschel's stipend even after the planet was renamed Uranus.)*

None of which is to suggest that British life in those days was particularly sane, as Ms. Casil now shows us...

Mad for the Mints

By Amy Sterling Casil

GIRARD CALLARD PEERED from the front door of his fashionable London confectionary to see a fine spring Tuesday. New orders for his curiously strong mints were coming in by the score. The lovely spring weather was marred only by the fact that, once again, Mad King George demanded the greatest part of Girard's mints. Another week's work done, and Girard had yet to see a farthing of payment from the Exchequer. The King now owed him a full seventy pounds. And how was Girard to collect?

Girard saw that a new customer was making his way up Bond Street at that moment. An oddly dressed fellow, but a gentleman all the same. He rode a well-turned-out white steed, and led a yellow mule behind him. His waistcoat of green baize stretched unevenly over his stout chest and belly. As the gray-haired fellow approached, Girard realized that the coat was fastened one button off. The fellow wore a curled and powdered white wig, which, like the jacket, was slightly askew.

An eccentric, he thought. Perhaps a scribbler, like that odd fellow, Dr.

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Johnson. Gods, it could be him! This fellow was stout and clumsy, just as Girard had heard the famous Dr. Johnson described.

Just his luck, Girard sighed, as the fellow approached. Everyone knew that Dr. Johnson the scribbler never paid his bills. Just like the Mad King.

"Hullo," the fellow called as he dismounted. "Have you a place to tie my mule?"

Girard nodded. The mule was a loathsome, spavined creature, yet he couldn't tell the fellow no. He was obviously a gentleman while Girard was a mere shopkeeper. The jeweler across the way peered disapprovingly from his shop. In ten minutes, word that Girard had a scrofulous yellow mule tied in front of his shop would be up and down Bond Street.

"You're the young man who makes the mints," the visitor said, wheezing with the effort of tying up his mule. His great white horse stood there with no restraint. Girard noticed the creature's fine mane and tail and its rolling black eyes. A gentleman's horse indeed, worth several hundred pounds, perhaps more. How was such a horse married with such a worthless old creature as the mule?

"Yes, I make the mints," Girard said. "Curiously strong, to aid digestion." Ten bushels were in the back of the shop, waiting for the King's footmen. And another bushel, hidden carefully, that Girard had promised to the good Earl of Buckingham, hoping against hope that the Earl's payment for it would be quick and in full.

"So I've heard," the customer said, smiling. There was something odd about the fellow's voice. Girard could not quite place the accent, though he'd known many foreigners.

"I'd like to try some," the man said. "Look here, as many as I can get. I've brought my own mule to carry them."

So that explained the difference between the fellow's creatures. Girard looked at the fine white horse. Surely the fellow had money. Would that Girard had any mints.

"Come inside," he said. "You may look all you like, but I'm terribly sorry."

The fellow stopped in the door, fingering his chin and muttering to himself.

"Sorry," he said. "Now why would a young man like you be sorry?"

"I'm afraid I have no — "

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"I wish that I were young once more," the customer said, interrupting. He fiddled with his crooked waistcoat, then added, "would I? Could I? My name is Collins, by the way. Come to London by way of Caernarvon."

If Girard knew a single thing, it was that this "Collins" had no Welsh accent. Nor was he any Irishman, as the name suggested.

"I'm afraid I have no mints to sell you," Girard said. "I've received a — " and he paused, for Lem and Rory, the two Cornish apprentices who stirred the great iron pots while Girard added the necessary quantities of oil of peppermint, had come from the back and stood beside each other, staring at the odd customer and pulling at their lower lips in curiosity.

"No mints? Why man, they're the talk of all London!" Collins exclaimed.

"I've received a great honor," Girard said, cautiously. "Our Lord King George has named me King's Confectioner. And the greatest part of what I make goes to him." An honor, aye. Girard with bills of his own to pay, and his wife Anne upstairs, heavy with his child. Going hungry each night for him, though Girard knew that she thought he knew nothing of how she saved what little food she had for his mouth, and the mouths of the lads.

Lem and Rory, who didn't know a thing about money, drew themselves up proudly, sticking their chins in the air. Collins looked at them, then laughed suddenly. "He has?"

"Yes," Girard said.

"Well, then you have no digestive mints for the likes of me," Collins replied. He turned, ready to leave.

"Believe me, sir," Girard said quickly. "Would that I had mints to sell you, for it has been ten week or more and the King has not paid me for all he has had."

Collins turned back, his mild blue eyes widening. "The King! Not pay?"

Girard nearly laughed aloud, for everyone knew that the Privy Purse was a purse in name only and had not a thing in it since the disaster with the colonies.

But still, Girard was careful. "I cannot think that the King knows," he said.

"Nay," Collins said. Then he sucked on his lower lip. "You speak the

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truth? That the King has taken your goods and made no payment in return?"

"He's signed bills," Girard said.

"Bills," Collins repeated. Again he stroked his chin. "Yes, I know what those are."

Girard looked sharply at him. "Ho, sir, you jest," he said. Who was more than a child who did not know that bills were things to be paid?

A child...or a madman. Perhaps this Collins was as mad as the King himself was.

"No, no jest," Collins said. "I thought only that — "

"My Lord King George's seal is on the bills." Girard went behind his counter, where each of the sealed bills lay. "Yet perhaps...they say he's mad. Mad as a — "

"Mad? Aye, so I've heard." Collins'sdemeanor changed once more, becoming familiar. His blue eyes twinkled. Again, Girard tried to place the accent, but could not. "They say," he continued, putting his elbow on the counter, "that the King insists that his horse can speak. That it advises him!"

"They do?" Girard said, though in truth, he had heard this before.

"And that he visits with creatures unnatural. Foreigners, they say, with evil purposes. And that he calls these foreigners his friends."

"Nay, not good King George," Girard said. He had heard all this old gossip and more down at the alehouse. He'd even heard that when the King made water, the color of it was blue. Looking over at Lem and Rory, he wished he could seal their ears. The boys' eyes were wide. They'd carry the whole thing up and down Bond Street directly. A yellow mule and talk against the King for his cobalt-colored urine! Girard was surely starting out on a fine path this day.

How could he rid himself of this odd fellow? It was plain there was naught but bad business to be done with him. Gossip. And royal gossip could land a man in Newgate Prison, or worse.

Girard looked again out the open shop door, where he saw the jeweler lowering his sign, making strange motions with his arms. He looked alarmed.

Then Girard heard a telltale creak that he'd heard before. A great wain coming down Bond Street, accompanied by the guttural shouts of German voices.

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The King's Hanoverian footmen.

"Sir, you had best leave," Girard said to Collins, who merely stuffed his hands in his waistcoat pockets and smiled benevolently at the boys.

Six of the King's tall footmen burst into the shop.

"God bless King George," Girard mumbled in the direction of their heavy Germanic faces. In their fine royal livery, they reminded him of nothing so much as a prize group of hogs done up with ribbons for May Day. And he thought, would that instead I could give them all a sharp kick in the arse.

Then, he thought, looking at Collins — at least now I have a witness!

"Ja," the leader said. Then, sniffing, he added, "You know what we seek."

"He has no mints," Collins said. "He told me himself. Told me also that the King...has not been paying!"

Girard's eyes widened. He stepped back, holding out his hands. "Now, I never said — "

"Nicht pay? Bah! A lie!" the footman's leader exclaimed. He looked at Collins. And then the footman said something to Collins in German that Girard did not understand.

"Now, you're all good men," Collins said in reply. "Very good fellows." And he chuckled heartily. "I see there's business to be done here," he added. "I shouldn't have come in. I think I'll take a ride by the river. It's a fine day for a ride. Don't you think?"

He addressed this to the German footman, who nodded.

"Ja," the fellow said. "Fine day."

Girard had the impression that the footman was threatening poor, strange Collins. But what could he do about it? He was threatened as well. Their sabres glinted evilly at their sides. And just like that, Collins was gone, depriving Girard of his witness, and leaving him to deal with the King's angry footmen.

He watched Collins mount his white steed and prepare to ride off. He wished he could cry out, beg for help...anything. But the fellow was gone, off down Bond Street before he could say a word. Heavy-hearted, Girard pointed the footmen toward the back, where the ten bushels lay. He prayed they wouldn't realize anything was different.

As they carried the mints from the shop, one of the footmen, a heavy-

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faced, dun-haired fellow with a large yellow pimple on the tip of his nose, paused.

"Nein, nein, this doesn't seem right," he said.

"What's that?" the leader asked. Girard watched the man balancing the bushel of mints in his arms. Each tin was only a few mints short. Each bushel was only a half-dozen tins under what was usually packed. The blemished footman couldn't possibly tell what Girard had done.

Could he?

"Das ist nicht sehr heavy as it were," the blemished footman continued.

"Aye," Girard said, stepping forward. "I can see you've improved your strength between last week and this. Why, a fine, strong — "

"Show me," said the head footman, interrupting Girard. He shoved Girard aside and reached for the heavy woven basket in the pimply footman's arms.

Before Girard could prevent a thing, the basket was passed from one liveried servant's arms to the other. And the head footman nodded as he took the basket, peering inside.

"Das ist richtig," the head footman said. "Ich bin — "

"Right as no rain," Girard said, for he knew some few words in German. "This will be a lovely day, methinks," he added.

Unmoved by his attempt at good humor, both of the footmen glared.

"Ja, Ethelbert," the leader said in his guttural Hanoverian accent. "It is lesser. The little stoat pissed only half a pot this time."

Little stoat? "Not half, you barbarian," Girard shouted, immediately regretting his hasty tongue.

The leader, whom Girard began to suspect was not as stupid as he looked, began to chuckle, a merry sound. Merry enough that Girard smiled a bit, until the man withdrew his long sabre and began to wave it about. In another second, four more bright sabres were unsheathed like so many carving knives being laid out to carve a Christmas roast; a sound that set Girard's teeth on edge and made his stomach sink like a bag of stones to the bottom of the Thames.

And perhaps it was the sudden fear, or the thought of Anne upstairs quietly mending his shirts, heavy with his child, which prompted something more to pop out of Girard's mouth. "'Twas the boys," he said,

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casting his glance toward the two boys who cowered in the rear of the shop. And at once he was appalled at what he'd said. But words once spoken cannot be retrieved and Girard could only look on his two good lads in silent horror.

The tall leader and Ethelbert of the giant pimple came forward, backed by the other four footmen.

"You blame the young ones?" the leader said, pausing to regard the bright sheen of his long blade in the flickering light of Girard's tallow shop lamps. "Das ist...despicable!"

Then the leader gestured toward the back of the shop, moving his sword arm in a sweeping motion.

"Search everything," he told the other footmen. "We take all we find," he added, keeping his eyes fixed on Girard's face.

Sweat dripped down Girard's nose. His hands trembled. The Earl of Buckingham's bushel of mints was in the back, shut tight in a strong oaken box.

In a moment, the leader had grabbed the lads, lifting each high by the collar of his shirt. The German was so strong that the boys' feet dangled half a foot in the air. Both children were crying.

"Lem!" Girard cried. "Rory!"

"Goodman Callard, help us," Rory begged.

Girard heard the other footmen sliding the bolt to the heavy, rough-hewn door, which guarded the back of the shop. He heard the door squeal as it always did. On normal days, the squeal meant that Lem and Rory were hard at work, carrying supplies in and out. On such days, Girard did not mind the squeak; he even found it comforting. Now, it was as chilling as if the footman had drawn his sword from Girard's neck to his belly.

"They're naught but boys. Can't you see?" Girard remembered what the footman's accusation: that he'd been despicable for casting suspicion on the children.

"You!" he called, pointing at the footman, "put them down! You called me despicable, but what of you?"

The big German smirked. "I do the King's business," he said. And he pressed his big blade close to Rory's stomach. Both boys screamed.

"Holy Christ," Girard said. "Put the boys down. I'll tell you where you can find the rest."

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"Ha!" the German laughed, throwing Lem and Rory to the floor and raising a cloud of peppermint-scented sugary dust. "Where is the other mints?"

Girard looked toward the heavy door. "They're all back there," he said, pointing in the direction that the other four footmen had gone. He hung his head, looking down at the peppermint dust-covered floor. "They'll find it," he added.

"Oh, ja," the leader said. Then he delivered a kick to the back of cowering Rory's neck. The boy cried out in pain and fear.

"There's no need," Girard said, jumping forward, only to be stayed by the German's sharp blade.

The leader turned toward Lem and prepared to kick him with his sharp-toed boot when the other four Germans returned from the back of the shop, their arms laden with red and white tins.

"Here bist they," said the pimple-nosed footman.

They were all laughing. The leader made again as if to kick Lem, but drew his foot away at the last moment, turning to the others and ordering them to load up the wain with the last of the mints they had found.

Rory and Lem ran to Girard, their thin arms embracing his legs like spiders clinging to a juicy fly as soon as all the footmen save the leader left the shop, carrying armloads of tins. Inside the shop, Girard heard nothing but the bell-like clamor of the tins striking each other as the German footmen hurled them carelessly into the wain.

Girard opened the shop door. He heard the leader coming up behind, but he paid him no mind. Instead, he called out angrily to the others, "You had better have a care. Your..." (Girard had to pause for he nearly said "mad King") "Lord and King, Master of all England and Scotland, the third of his name, will expect these in good condition. Therefore you must keep them carefully." And just then, Girard saw that the yellow mule remained tied in front of his shop. Absent-minded Collins had ridden his fine horse off without him.

"Do you think we are stupid?" the leader asked him, grabbing his shoulder. Girard tore himself away, forcing himself to glare fiercely up at the bigger, more muscular footman.

"Oh, no," Girard said, for despite his earlier errors, it was not Girard who was the stupid one in the room.

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"You think, 'these stupid Germans do not know their business,'" the leader said. "Well, you learned otherwise today; this is true?"

"Ja, mine-ah hair-en," Girard said. The German grinned. Then he turned, gesturing toward the yellow mule.

"Das esel," he said to the others. They shrugged, as if the animal was beneath their concern and said more things in German that Girard did not understand. "Eselkopf," and something else. "Nicht for us."

They all laughed. And as they laughed, Girard took the chance to snatch a single tin from the wain, dropping it into his waistcoat pocket.

At that moment, Girard's good wife Anne leaned out of the upstairs window and called down to the street.

"In the name of our Lord, let them go," she said, her voice trembling. Her hand was on her belly.

Girard took one look at her and nodded.

"Yes, love," he said.

Smirking and laughing, two of the footmen mounted the wain, while the others mounted their snow-white steeds, decked in the King's magnificent livery, as marvelous as Collins's white horse save for their mud and ordure-splattered forelegs. The leader rode off in front, the others behind. Girard watched, his fists clenched, as all hope of paying his creditors and even of having some sort of Easter ham or a joint of roast mutton receded down Bond Street. Behind him, Rory and Lem stood in the door, softly weeping.

From above, Anne called down once more: "Girard Callard, you are a fool!" Then she slammed the window shut. Sweet woman, but she did have a temper.

He turned to look at the yellow mule, standing stolidly where he'd been tied. It seemed that Collins's abandoned beast was the only profit Girard was likely to get that day. Or any other, he thought blackly. It would be Newgate for him. At best, Debtor's Prison. Anne could bring him gruel each morning. Or perhaps their babe could grow up in a tiny prison garret.

So ended the short career of the King's Confectioner. He wished he'd never smelled oil of peppermint, much less come up with the recipe.

"Why don't you just try asking the King for money?" Rory asked.

Girard looked at the boy's simple, freckled face.

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"The King wouldn't like what the footmen are doing," Rory added. "If he knew, you'd have your money."

"And we'd have enough to eat," Lem added. "Our mistress wouldn't be so angry all of the time."

"Hush," Girard told the boy. "Your mistress is as sweet as sugar."

Lem crossed his arms and looked at his feet. The mule tossed his head and drew his lips away from his big, square teeth. As if he doubted Girard about the good Lady Anne just as Lem and Rory did.

Girard owned neither horse nor mule. Few shopkeepers did. The creature looked as though his legs could scarcely bear the weight of his own body.

He patted the mule on its neck and studied its ancient, rheumy eyes.

And a thought came to him. Perhaps there had been some Providence in the whole affair. Perhaps he could ride after the wain and somehow catch the footmen. Somehow plead his case — for they were taking the mints to the King, were they not? Perhaps the boys were right, and the King did not know what was done in his name. Yes, the more he thought of it, the more appealing the idea seemed.

At the very least, he knew that he couldn't stay in the shop with nothing to do. The innocent faces of Rory and Lem accused him. How could he have been so cowardly? Putting the vile Hanoverians off on them.

The upstairs window opened once more. "Fool!" Anne called down. "Cad! Bounder!" Then she slammed it shut again.

One way or another, Girard knew that he had to make it right.

"I'll try," he told the boys as he untied the mule.

The creature groaned like a woman in labor when he mounted it. He kicked it in the ribs and it began to stagger down Bond Street. The peppermint-loaded wain left deep ruts in Bond Street, but the farther Girard rode Collins's yellow mule, the more uncertain he was of just which deep tracks were the wain's, and which belonged to some other cart. And the King's horses, though well-shod, made nearly the same marks as every other hoofed animal that had been ridden down the muddy street.

Soon Girard came to a crossing. He paused, uncertain whether he should take the left fork or the right. He started toward the left, until all at once, almost as if it was a miracle, he caught the faint yet unmistakable odor of a generous amount of oil of peppermint on the spring breeze, and

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saw a light dusting of white powder leading toward the right fork in the road. And so Girard went to the right, urging the mule forward as fast as the spavined beast could carry him.

The road was leading him toward Hampton Court: a good half day's ride.

That was one of the King's great houses, though it was said he did not much use it. The closer Girard got to the magnificent palace, the more certain he was that he would find the footmen and the wain there. And perhaps the King himself, to whom he could plead his case.

Hadn't someone been beheaded at Hampton Court? Or was it merely that the old Cardinal Wolsey had built the house to suit his lavish tastes, then had the manor torn from him to serve the pleasure of old King Henry Eighth?

A very bad man, Henry Eighth, Girard was thinking as he rode down the long approach to Hampton Court. Good Lord, Girard thought, were there any normal Kings of England? Folk said that Henry had worn a wig in his old age to cover his diseased, scrofular scalp. And who had not seen the pictures of Gloriana in her old age? Henry's daughter Elizabeth, a most magnificent, if unnatural woman, chalk-white face glistening with lead paint and vermilion streaked cheeks under a wig the color of Hell's flames itself.

And as these thoughts crowded Girard's mind, a face of nearly such whiteness appeared before him, blocking his way into Hampton Court.

A strange, long, black-eyed face framed by a white powdered and beribboned wig, much like the wig that odd fellow Collins had worn into the shop. A very odd face, with wide flaring nostrils...and ears protruding beyond the wig.

Girard cried out. The mule stopped dead, planting his front hooves in the raked gravel, and would go no further.

Then Girard realized it was no man who blocked his way, it was a horse which had emerged from the deep green privet hedge on the side of the path. A horse: in a wig.

And a tall, large-bellied man, quite wigless, his thinning gray hair tied back with a simple black ribbon, his green baize waistcoat askew and pants half-buttoned, emerged from the privet hedge to stand beside the horse. Collins, the same as in the morning, though minus his wig and a bit worn-down, as though he'd ridden hard.

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"I see you've made friends with Phutatorius now," the man said, indicating the wigged horse. "And Good Lord man, thank you for bringing back St. Thomas Aquinas."

"Good heavens, Collins," Girard said. "I didn't know what to think." Thank God the fellow thought he was trying to help him, not steal his mule. St. Thomas Aquinas? That was the mule's name! And the horse...Phutatorius?

He was a madman, though he seemed a pleasant-enough one.

Girard began to lose all hope of finding the wain. Slowly, he got off the mule's back. The mule snorted as the wigged horse went to its side and began to nuzzle its neck affectionately.

"You haven't seen the King's men come through here, have you?" Girard asked Collins. Not that such a fellow would notice, or care.

He handed the mule's reins over to the strange fellow, sighing.

Collins put one finger to his chin. "Let me see," he said. "A wain. King's footmen. Yes, I think I have."

"I'm looking for them," Girard said. "They have...I need to find them."

"They went right this way," the man said, pointing through the great gate to Hampton Court. Then, he giggled. "So I think," he said. A thoroughgoing madman.

Girard turned to go, his heart heavy. But then he thought a moment longer, and with a shiver, he turned. A madman, with a great white horse. And an accent that Girard could not name. Could it be? With such a man as this, Girard should feel no shame in asking. But what if he was right? He began to tremble in fear. Turning back to Collins, he asked in a very soft voice, "Are you my Lord George the Third? Ought I bow to you?"

"That is my name," the man replied. "But I never like people to bow. It's a very unpleasant view of their heads and backs and posteriors, don't you think?"

All Girard could do was nod. The King seemed neither barbaric nor foreign. Yet still, what should he make of the man? That wonderful white horse, wearing his master's wig! And his clothes all askew like that, even worse than in the morning. "My Lord, forgive me," Girard said, thinking deference to be the best course. Then he started to walk backward, because he had heard somewhere that was the only way to leave the presence of the

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King. He had the distinct impression that St. Thomas Aquinas, who did not want to walk backward, was staring at him as though he was the mad one. And out of the corner of his eye, it looked as though the wigged horse Phutatorius thought so as well.

The white horse Phutatorius snorted.

"Oh, we were both in disguise this morning," King George said. He patted the horse's wig. "It's his wig, not mine. But I can hardly ride him like that around town, can I? And I'm sorry," he said, pausing a moment. "It was a foolish thing, trying to get some more mints for myself like that. I oughtn't have them. The doctors say they're the reason my urine has turned quite blue. But it's no matter either way. All the mints are gone again. It doesn't take long."

As soon as Girard had taken in the comment about blue urine and decided that every alehouse rumor he'd heard was true, he realized that the King had said that all ten bushels were gone. All gone! It was a miracle the King was still standing. Why, no man could eat so many of the curiously strong mints in so short a period of time and survive. Girard sniffed the air for the scent of peppermint, but he detected none.

"Gone?" Girard said.

"Why yes," the King said. "As soon as my men bring them, I have them take them to my friends and they take them away. On their ship."

"Ship?"

The King chuckled. "Yes, a great silver ship. That's why I thought to ride by your shop this morning. To get some for myself." He paused, looking at his fingernails, seeming to think for a bit. "I give orders," he said. "And they follow them, but somehow nothing every turns out as I'd like. They're doing what I say, you know, though they think me mad. But it's not quite...right."

"Silver ship," Girard repeated, very slowly. Why, they were miles from any place ships were launched. Who had ever heard of a silver ship? And even if the King's Privy Purse was a real purse, he could not collect enough silver to make an entire ship. Why, there wasn't enough silver in the entire world to do such a thing, provided someone were...mad enough to do it.

"I'll take you if you like, young man," the King said. He smiled at Girard. "I like your face. I did right off."

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Then he turned, walking down the path toward the great maze beside Hampton Court. It was a famous place. Girard had heard of it, but of course, had never seen it. "Come, come," he said, gesturing. "Come along smartly now."

"My Lord," Girard said as he trotted to keep up with the King, Phutatorius, and the mule St. Thomas Aquinas, who were setting a very hot pace as they entered the maze and began to wind around and around it, "I think there is something I should tell. It was no lie this morning. The King...you, sir...owe me a great deal of money."

Without stopping, the King said, "Yes, I understand."

Girard didn't think that the King understood at all. He looked for signs of the footmen's wain towering over the hedgerows of the maze. "I think — " he said, then he fell silent.

They'd reached the center of the maze. And there in front of Girard, in the circular middle of the high privet hedgerows, was something that made the wigged horse, a disguised King and a yellow mule by the name of St. Thomas Aquinas seem as ordinary as a draught of ale and a wedge of Cheshire cheese. The thing was as big as Girard's shop in Bond Street, perhaps bigger, and it looked like a silver fish, or a strange, enormous piece of silver fruit, all smooth and sleek and pointed on one end, jammed deep into the grassy earth on the other. Long, flat triangular vanes, something like the buttressed arches of a cathedral, protruded from its sides.

To Girard, it looked nothing like a ship. It looked nothing like anything he'd ever seen, save those few strange associations in his mind. For how could something made of metal be a fruit? How could it be a fish?

"My Lord," he said, "what is this thing?"

The King laughed. "The ship of my good friends from a land far away. Sirius, they call it. By coincidence the name of the Dog Star, though they say it is not quite the same one that they come from."

If there'd been any doubt before, which there was not, Girard knew that the King was absolutely stark raving mad. A thoroughgoing lunatic who belonged in Bedlam, chained to a wall.

"They are such good friends," the King continued. "I would do anything for them. It is amazing that you have invented these mints, for they tell me that they are the most delicious confection they have ever

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tasted. Food for their souls, they say." The King stopped to laugh a moment and finger his chin.

"Your friends have eaten them all?" Bushel after bushel. Everything Girard and his lads had made for weeks...all going somehow into the maw (which Girard could not discern) of this weird silver fish.

The King nodded. Then he turned, his mild blue eyes full of sympathy and concern. "I hope I haven't hurt your feelings. For I know that you thought that I was eating the mints by myself."

Girard shook his head. How could he collect a cent? He had to humor the madman, for one never knew what someone so lunatic would do. Why, the mild-seeming King might turn on him at any moment. Perhaps spur the wigged horse on to run Girard down. The horse had a fierce quality, Girard thought, despite the playful aspect provided by his powdered wig.

At that moment, the silver fish split open to disgorge what lay inside. Girard stepped back, holding his breath. Thomas Aquinas the mule snorted and began to tremble. Even the wigged horse, Phutatorius, seemed anxious, pawing at the green and tossing his head around, nostrils flaring.

Two glowing figures emerged. Girard went to his knees and began to pray.

Dear Lord protect me in my hour of need.

"It is good," one of the glowing people said.

Lord, their eyes are too big and too black. They...Lord, they have no noses, not that my eyes can see. Sweet Jesus, please come down. Save me with your grace.

"Sweet and delicious," the other one said.

"Good, good," the King said. "Oh, my good friends, I am so glad."

Good God, please send your Holy Spirit. Lord God in heaven, in my bones I know they are...wrong creatures. I know these are not men. Yet be they angels or be they devils? Lord God, please do not let them eat me!

At that moment, quite certain that the glowing creatures were not of this world, Girard knelt beside St. Thomas Aquinas the mule, who had begun to back up a quarter of an inch at a time, and whose hot, fetid breath came in damp snorts on the back of Girard's neck.

"Friend George," one of the glowing creatures said, "please ask this young man if he will tell us how to make these peppermints."

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"Yes, we have tried to duplicate them, but there are special qualities which elude us."

"Qualities that feed our souls," the other one said.

"Qualities we must have. The mint is strong, and warm...." and here the glowing creature looked at his friend, saying, "that is not the right word."

"No, not right," the other one said. "Food for soul...right."

"But I've told you before," the King said, his voice petulant. "You have asked, and I have given. Even I, the King, may not demand from this young man the recipe. He may make these mints for us, but I can't ask him to give up his entire livelihood, even for his King."

At that moment, Girard found his tongue sufficiently to speak to the King. He stopped praying. "But you did, my Lord. You did cause me to lose my livelihood."

The King turned, his face a picture of dismay. "What?" he said.

"I already told you, my Lord," Girard said. He'd said his piece to "Collins" in the shop and repeated it to the undisguised King moments earlier. "Every week your footmen would show up. And they took all my mints. Not just a part, all, my Lord King. I have not had anything left...for some time. And the bills have never been paid. Drawn on the Exchequer. The paper's worthless, the bank said. Why, down at the bank — "

Girard stopped himself. Down at the Bank they'd called the King's paper Spanish paper, which meant it was without worth to anyone. And they'd laughed.

"A madman's name is no good, they say," Girard said, feeling ashamed that he spoke so to his King. "Others write in his name. Why not go to Mister Pitt?" Meaning the Prime Minister, the one with the real power.

The King's jaw worked. It looked as though he was about to cry.

"The truth is," he said at last, "I haven't had a penny farthing I could call my own since we lost the colonies. They just humor me. That's all. Yes, perhaps you should go to Mister Pitt. It is he who thinks I'm mad, chiefly."

"What does he mean?" one of the glowing figures said.

"What is farthing?" the other asked.

The King turned to face the glowing figures. "Farthing is a man's money. How he gets things and buys things," he said.

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"Why?" both of the glowing figures said in unison.

The King sighed. "That is a talk we shall have another time," he said.

And Girard, who had been firmly convinced that the King was a lunatic of the first order, began to question that judgment once more.

"My Lord," Girard said, hoping that the King had some shred of sanity remaining, "I am ruined. You see before you a ruined man. There is no place for me to go from here but Debtor's Prison. And I have a wife at home, Anne, and a babe on the way."

The King's face was nothing but gentle sympathy and concern. "A wife, you say?"

"Aye," Girard said. "A more sweet, beautiful wife was never matched with a man."

The wigged horse snorted and pawed the grass. "Hogwash," he said, then he tossed his powdered, curled, artificial mane.

Holy Lord God, the horse talks. It truly talks. Is the King the mad one or is it me? Preserve me, oh Lord.

"You had better be an honest man," the horse added. "For if anyone ever needed an honest friend, it is my master."

The King looked at Phutatorius, seemingly amazed, then at Girard. "He's never talked to anyone else before," he said. "No one would ever believe me. Now, son, do you believe me?" The King's face was suffused with joy and wonder. "I have a talking horse!" he cried.

And somehow, with the horse's interruption, Girard's fear fled. The situation was strange, true, stranger than Girard could ever have dreamed in the worst sort of ale or gin-fueled nightmare, but how could he be afraid of two such thin, pitiful creatures as the King's "friends"? Or afraid of a talking horse and a spavined mule with a saintly name?

"Aye, my Lord," Girard said, answering the King. "You do have a talking horse. And some sort of magical beasties for friends as well."

The glowing figures shifted beside the ship.

"You make these things," one of them said.

"Tell us exactly how. We have...machines...which will duplicate. But there is something about your soil here, perhaps, or about the things you use to prepare them, which we cannot duplicate. Our mints are not so warm, or inviting."

Girard began to think. He thought a long while before he said

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anything. And in his pocket was the single tin of mints he'd snatched from the German footmen. He fingered it as he answered the creatures.

"Where said you that you came from?" he asked.

"Far away," one said.

"Sirius, the Dog Star," the other one added.

And somehow, Girard knew that they were lying. He liked to think of himself as a canny, practical man. And he had known many a foreigner, for all he had not been able to identify "Collins's" accent. A court accent, he now knew. A man in trade couldn't help but know all manner of foreigners. The mad King might not be as German as Girard had thought, but these two were madder than the King, and, if Girard was right, far more barbaric. Why, they were stranger than heathen Hindoos or Ayrabs.

"And so you sailed from there...in this ship?" he asked.

"Yes, in the ship," they said in unison.

"And how long have you been in...port?"

The two foreign creatures examined each other with their large, lozenge-shaped black eyes.

"Ten of your years," one of them said after a moment.

"Why yes," the King chimed in. "They were about to leave when I came upon the mints. Said their time here was done. It was they who counseled me during that dreadful war with the colonies. Why, it was good it came to an end as soon as it did, wasn't it?"

Girard turned to the King. He pointed at the foreigners. "You listened to their counsel and we lost the colonies?"

A shadow passed over the King's mild face. He looked down at his gold-buckled shoes. "I suppose that's true," he said.

"Surely, my Lord, you know that England's sovereignty and our trade must be protected. These are not good Englishmen," he said, looking sharply at the glowing foreigners. "You cannot trust their counsel. Look where it has taken you." And at once, seeing the King's downcast face, Girard was overcome with pity. The poor fellow! Bullied about by such freaks as this, and kept a pauper by his own government. All because folk thought him mad. Perhaps he was mad. But the horse did talk.

Where the talking horse had come from, Girard did not know, nor did he believe a word the two foreigners said. But the King, he thought, looking in his broad, simple face, was an honest man. And a kind one, too.

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The two foreigners began to murmur between themselves. Girard paid them no attention. Phutatorius whinnied and threw back his head.

Good Lord, the horse agreed with him! Well, where was the surprise in that? He seemed a good English horse. Girard went on. "Now you have ruined an Englishman's trade, and perhaps a source of good pound sterling for the Crown, by listening to the idle banter of these...foreigners."

The King's face looked as sad as if Phutatorius had just died, though the horse was alive and well, pawing and snorting joyfully beside St. Thomas Aquinas, who waited stolidly behind Girard.

"We are not...foreigners," one of the creatures said.

"What is idle?" the other asked.

Girard turned his attention to them. As with all lying, Godless foreigners, they were motivated by blind greed and venality, he thought. And still he fingered the tin of peppermints in his pocket. He withdrew it and held it out.

"So this is what you want?" he asked.

They stepped forward hungrily. Girard stepped back.

"I'm a man of business," he said. "I'll gladly supply my Lord King George free of charge. But not such foreigners as you!" He glanced toward the King, unsure whether he had spoken too boldly. But the King was staring at his shoes, seemingly lost in thought.

Girard tugged on the King's sleeve, gently. The King looked up at him, utterly confused, and Girard said, "My Lord, you have already made me King's Confectioner. Now I pray you, grant me your license so that I may make these peppermints exclusively. And I will sell them to these...foreigners...at two pounds a gross. And you shall receive — " Girard thought carefully about this next part. "A tariff of twenty percent for those mints they consume here on English land. And should they take the mints from our land, another duty of fifteen percent above that."

The King put his finger to his lower lip and tugged thoughtfully on it. "That is forty shillings for each gross," he said.

"Not exactly," Girard said. He'd expected as much. The King had already shown he knew little or nothing about money. Girard gestured toward Phutatorius. "At the rate these fellows eat the mints, it's a lot of oats for your talking horse. And, you can pay your bills straight away."

The King's face brightened. "You think so?"

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"Aye," Girard nodded.

"Well, it's done then," the King said. He turned toward the glowing foreigners. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked.

They made a buzzing noise between themselves. Girard crossed his arms and waited.

At last, one said, "Fifteen percent duty, fifteen percent tariff for export."

Perhaps the foreigners were not so unsophisticated as they seemed.

"And the recipe," the other one added.

"Nay!" Girard cried.

Phutatorius whinnied as well, pawing the ground.

The King looked back and forth between them. "No, I think not," he said at last.

"If you do not have him give us the recipe, we will leave, friend George," one of them said.

"We will never return," the other added.

The King's face shadowed once more. "But you are my only friends," he said, voice full of sadness.

Girard wanted to step forward and say, "not so!" But he held back, for he sensed something passing between the King and the wretched foreigners.

And he saw how the foreign creatures leaned toward the peppermint tin in his hand. They craved it. Whatever it was about the mints that caused them to consume them in such quantity, it was a powerful inducement. They would not leave. Not so long as Girard Callard was making peppermints.

He leaned over and whispered this in the King's ear.

"Do you think?" the King asked.

"Watch," Girard said, opening the tin of peppermints.

The foreigners hunched over and reached toward Girard, strange dark mouths open wide.

"Would you care for a mint?" Girard asked.

"Yes!" they cried at once.

Stingily, Girard doled a single mint into each of their open hands. And he noticed that they had only three long fingers on each, and an odd thumb that looked too long, as if it had an extra joint at the base. Greedily, the

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foreigners threw the mints into their mouths, making vile sucking noises.

"Twenty percent tariff here, another fifteen percent duty on export," Girard said. "And on two pounds and a half sterling a gross."

The foreigners nodded as they sucked on the mints.

"More!" one of them cried.

"All right," Girard said. "A twenty-five percent duty on exports."

"No, no," the other said. "More mints!"

Girard turned to the King. He gently took his hand, which was trembling. "My Lord," he said softly. "See how they are?" Then, he paused. "This could be the beginning of a trade the likes of which England has never seen. Who knows how many of these folk live in their land? And how much silver they have amongst them? Why, if they can build a ship like this, they can pay us whatever we ask!"

Phutatorius whinnied again. The King looked over at his wigged horse, then back at Girard. "Do you really think?" he whispered.

"Yes," Girard said, and he squeezed the good old King's hand.

King George fumbled at his waistcoat, finally withdrawing a pearl-handled pocket knife. He smiled at Girard.

"Kneel," he said. "I'm afraid this is all I have," he added, unfolding the knife. "I never cared much for swords. In fact, they won't let me touch them anymore. Not since I had an...accident."

Girard knelt.

And with his six-inch pearl-handled pocket knife, King George the Third dubbed Girard Callard a knight of the British Empire, with all the rights and privileges that implied. And then he granted him his exclusive license to make his curiously strong peppermints, and exclusive right of trade with the sovereign nation of the people from the Dog Star, all duties previously mentioned entailed to the Crown.

Girard eyes stung. He knelt a long while until the King finally grabbed his shoulder and shook it, repeating that he could stand now, for he much disliked people bowing and kneeling before him unless it was absolutely necessary.

Girard stood, then he gave his last box of peppermints to the foreigners, who fell upon it as starving men to a meal of mutton and potatoes.

And Phutatorius pawed the grass, moving close to the old yellow mule and nuzzling the old creature's neck.

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"So you are fond of the saintly Thomas Aquinas," Girard said to the wigged horse.

Phutatorius cocked his head. "As sure as you're married to a harridan," he replied. Then the wigged horse turned to the King. "And it was about time you did something about them," he said. "I don't know why I ever bothered to talk, since you never listened to me."

"By Holy Christ," Girard said, for what the horse had said about Girard's good wife Anne was true, in faith. "Whence came you?"

The horse curled his lip and snorted. "Surely you know good Doctor Swift," he said. "When he returned from his travels, I came with him. I wanted to see this land of well-shod Yahoos."

"Yahoos?" Girard asked.

"Aye," the horse said. "And my people are the Houyhnhmn. As far from Yahoo as you can get." With this last, the horse whinnied.

The King embraced his talking horse's neck. "And I'm grateful to Doctor Swift. You are my friend," he said. "My only true one." Then, he looked at Girard, sighing. "And you, too, young man. How can I thank you?"

The strange foreigners retreated back into their silver ship, making odd, satisfied-sounding sucking noises as they went.

"More," one of them said. "More!"

"Not until you pay!" Girard called as the opening in the silver ship snapped shut behind them.

He turned back to the King. Anne, harridan or not, was still his wife. And she was at home, hungry, as were the boys Lem and Rory. "I have a babe on the way," Girard said. "Once these foreigners pay, things shall be better, but my wife has gone hungry, my Lord. And the two lads 'prenticed to me as well. Is there not something you could provide?"

The King laughed. "Come with me into my house," he said, gesturing toward the vast expanse of Hampton Court. "Though I don't live here, the kitchen goes day and night. We ought to be able to pack you a fine feast to take home."

Girard sighed. "But I have no means to carry it."

Phutatorius nudged St. Thomas Aquinas. The mule snorted. "He might be willing to carry it back for you," the horse said.

The King grasped Girard's hand, laughing. "Yes, he will," he said. "Indeed, he will."

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"Well, this is a fine day," Phutatorius said as they walked across the great green toward George's house, looking up at the clear blue April sky. "Fine in London and fine here. Perhaps even fine back in the land of Houyhnhmns."

"I have found a true friend," the King said, patting Girard's shoulder as they walked.

"Yes, my Lord," Girard said quietly. He was adding up the tariffs and what he and the King both could expect to earn from the exclusive license. The King mad? Innocent, perhaps, that was all. He couldn't help but smile as he looked at the old man's face, the very picture of joy and delight.

"You know I'm not mad," the King said softly as they walked.

"Aye, my Lord, I know," Girard said. And he spoke the truth.

—For Jim Blaylock, with a hot chestnut and the half-pound red and white tin.

"He followed me to work, Chief. Can I keep him?"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Legends Walking, by Jane Lindskold, Avon, 1999, $6.99.

REGULAR readers of this column already know my feeling about most sequels, trilogies, and series books. The goods ones invariably start out fascinating—fresh characters, fresh settings, creative plots, or at least new takes on old themes — but by the second book, everything that seemed so original the first time out already begins to feel tired, and boredom soon sets in. The enormous sales figures for all those successful multi-book series notwithstanding, I know I'm not alone in my reaction, as it's a complaint that I hear over and over again from other readers.

But there's something seductive for both author and reader about returning to the world and characters and ideas of a particularly successful novel — and I mean successful here in terms of its entertainment values, not its sales. And it can be done well. Everyone will have their own favorites, but it strikes me that there are two ways to go, if you're going to do it right.

The first is what the late Marion Zimmer Bradley did so successfully in her early Darkover books, and that is to make the setting the continuing factor of the series, rather than the characters. Familiar faces might make cameo appearances, but mostly we meet a new cast each time out. It combines the familiar with the new in one package.

The other is to follow a continuing cast, but to have actual character growth from book to book. This breaks the first rule of franchises, of course (which is: no matter what happens in the book, the character must be the same at the end as he or she was when the story began). Too many series ignore the idea of character growth, but even those that do with the first few books, often fall into the trap sooner or later. The trouble is, without

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character growth, the stories are meaningless.

Which leads us into *Legends Walking*, Jane Lindskold's sequel to her wonderful novel *Changer*.

**Spoiler alert. If you haven't read *Changer* and think you'd like to, you'd better skip to the next review as some of the things I'm going to discuss here will spoil elements in that earlier book.

Lindskold has hedged her bets with *Legends Walking*. She keeps the delightful premise of *Changer* for the new book (living among us are athanor, immortal beings that we only know through myths and folktales), but uses much of the cast from the earlier novel. However, while she follows up on plotlines from *Changer* (we get to watch Shahrazad, Changer's daughter, growing up; we see how the two humans that now work for King Arthur are fitting in; there's more on the theriomorphs — fauns, sasquatches, etc. — and their attempts to walk among human society), Lindskold does make the wise choice of focusing mostly on secondary characters from the earlier volume.

So while Arthur, Merlin, and Changer do come on stage, they have much smaller roles. Ditto for Lil, Tommy Thunderburst, and a few of the other principal characters. Taking their place is Shahrazad, who was just a coyote pup through the first book. One of the main plotlines centers on her time spent on the ranch of Frank MacDonald (St. Francis), learning how to integrate with the other athanor. Another deals with Anson (the spider-god Anansi) and Arthur's former right-hand man Eddie Zagano in Nigeria, confronting a fanatical would-be ruler who might or might not be one of the athanor, but styles himself as Shopona, the God of Smallpox. The last deals with a new tour by Tommy Thunderburst that plans to include a number of satyrs and fauns in the stage show.

The last one seems like a throwaway to me — present only for some comic relief, I suppose — and never really caught my interest. But happily it appears only briefly and I loved what Lindskold did with the rest of the book. The sections set in Africa are wonderfully evocative, full of fascinating historical, social, and mythological elements, while Shahrazad's adventures on St. Frank's ranch offered never a dull moment. And much as I'm leery of sequels, I'm looking forward to her coming-of-age story, if and when Lindskold decides to write it.

Unlike James Stoddard's recent

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sequel to *The High House* (which was only *The High House*, part two; nothing much new), Lindskold manages to give us all the delightful elements that made *Changer* the treat it was, while still covering new ground. And in the world of series books, that's having the best of both worlds.

Angry Young Spaceman, by Jim Munroe, No Media Kings, 2000, $20.

I have a bone to pick with the literary community — actually, I have more than one, but I'm trying to stay focused here — and that's how self-published fiction gets so little respect. Self-published fiction should be judged by the same criteria as that published by conglomerates. Why? Because it's the story that counts. And if the story's good, who cares who published it? But tradition in the literary community holds that, if no one paid you to have your book published, well, then it can't really be any good, now, can it?

I see it differently, perhaps because I come to writing from an outside community. Most of my friends are musicians, or involved in the visual arts, as well as those who are writers. When someone in our community produces her own CD, or an artist mounts an exhibition in his studio, we applaud the effort and do as I said above: judge the work by its merits, not by who put up the money to get it produced. Doesn't matter if we know them personally or not.

Because the truth is, original and interesting work doesn't always lend itself to the corporate bottom line. I don't have a problem with that — the big publishing concerns are in business to show a profit, not for altruistic reasons. Still, there are any number of fine writers — even excellent writers — who can't get published by the big guns, or more tellingly, choose not to do so.

Jim Munroe, author of *Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask* (reviewed in the October 1999 issue) is a case in point. His new novel *Angry Young Spaceman* is self-published. I'll talk a little more about that in a moment, but first: what's the book about? What's it like?

Well, it's your classic novel about the angry young man dissatisfied with his own society, who decides, as much to make a point as to simply get away, to hie himself off to some foreign nation. When you have no income, your choices are limited to various charitable foreign services and teaching English.

So that's what our first person

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protagonist Sam Breen does. Except this is set in the future and Breen is a pug, a fighter who settles differences with his fists rather than hiring a slander-by-the hour firm. Then the Pug Swindle hits the news — the revelation that pug culture wasn't created by the pugs themselves, but by a company looking to make a profit by creating what appeared to be the first spontaneous youth culture on Earth for a thousand years. Disillusioned, Breen leaves to teach English on a distant planet called Octavia. A world where the atmosphere is so thick it's like water, where he doesn't know the language or culture, but he can reinvent himself.

It's a wonderful book, amusing and serious as it explores the classic stranger in a strange land plot. Unquestionably sf, it isn't written in the usual science fiction voice, and that's part of its charm. Munroe doesn't bother to give us long explanations as to how things work, he just carries on with his story. His prose is conversational, his characters and settings of the future earth and Octavia are fascinating, and the story remains engaging from start to finish.

I'm glad he published it himself, though it turns out it wasn't because he had to do so. Readers can order a hardcopy (U.S.$20 postpaid from No Media Kings, 10 Trellanock Ave., Toronto, ON M1C 5B5, Canada), but more intriguingly, the complete text of the book is available for free on the Internet at <www.nomediakings.org>. This puzzled me enough that I got in touch with the author to ask him why. How did he expect to make any money when he was basically giving the book away?

"In terms of the text version of the book cutting into sales," he wrote back, "so do library copies, and I don't resent that. I've put a lot of effort into making *Angry Young Spaceman* a beautiful consumer object. I'm betting that people will read the first couple of chapters and then buy the book."

And it turns out he went the self-publishing route because of his convictions, believing that he could do as good a job at producing a book in Canada as could a major company (I guess the name of his imprint makes that plain, right off the bat). The difference is, he has more invested in the product. For him it's not simply one of ten or fifteen other releases this month.

"Ten years ago," he went on in his e-mail response to my questions, "people saw an indie CD and thought, 'Oh, I guess they couldn't

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get a major label deal.' Now public perception has changed so much that a person who sees an indie CD says, 'Oh, I guess they've got ethical problems with major labels.'

"Indie rock in the '90's, indie press in the '00's. An individual can produce a book as slick and inexpensive as the corporations, plus there's a community of driven, media-savvy zinesters who are hooked on self-publishing. Media consolidation in the print market and the quality of self-published stuff are the mirror versions of what made indie rock a viable alternative to corporate music."

We keep seeing articles on the future of publishing. With books becoming readily available to be read on Palm Pilots, electronic readers and home computers, with print-on-demand and self-publishing exercises such as Munroe has so ably put into practice, it looks as though the future's already here. The question now is, how viable will these alternative publishing methods prove to be in the long run?

I don't have the answer. All I know is that, in the long run, the good books will stand out the way they always do. Perhaps not immediately, but given time and word-of-mouth, it will happen. And the real difference with all these new methods of bringing a story from writer to readers is that whenever you hear about a great book available through one of these new media, chances are it'll still be available for purchase, rather than having been remaindered a few months after publication.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Man Who Fell to Earth, by Walter Tevis, Del Rey Impact, 1999, $11.95.

Mockingbird, by Walter Tevis, Del Rey Impact, 1999, $11.

IN 1968, freshly repatriated to New York from London, where I had edited *New Worlds*, I was consulted by a paperback publisher who wanted to create a science fiction list. Wanting also to remain within the tradition, he planned to spend as little money as possible to accomplish this, so in his office one afternoon we spoke of books that might have been overlooked and readily available. I went back to my apartment, sat down at the table where I worked, and with no hesitation wrote: #1 *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Published as a paperback original five years earlier (I told the publisher at our meeting the next day), this book had been little noticed and was out of print. It was also, I told him, among the finest science fiction novels ever written.

Each work of art, every book, is a doomed balancing act, the creation of a fulcrum by which the world momentarily may be lifted and brought to rest, tottering. From the textures of daily life and the formlessness of individual lives, the writer or painter attempts to model the world entire — in Baudelaire's words, to rescue from the quotidian frenzy one clear look at truth's enduring face. Near-sighted and far-sighted eyes acting in concert, with luck, to bring the whole thing into focus.

Science fiction and fantasy, the literature of the fantastic, may be uniquely suited to such double vision. Not only has it embraced an agenda abandoned by much other fiction — to place a framework around man's place in the universe — but also its very forms lead easily to mystery, fabulation and parable, the play of archetypes. For that reason, many of us who began

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writing in the Sixties believed with Michel Butor that science fiction, speculative fiction, might provide a contemporary mythology, pulling together all of literature's grand old themes while also revealing profoundly new ones.

We also believed that the civil rights for which we struggled, those now being bled away from us, would thereafter prove inalienable: And that rock music wasn't some commodity to be packaged by businessmen and sold by the yard, but a force to change the world.

These were a few of the fictions we lived by.

And the fictions we live by were exactly what Walter Tevis wrote about.

Two images:

A man walks in the streets of a small town in early morning. Everything he sees about him, everything he encounters, is strange, unfamiliar, frightening. Trying not to think about what he is soon to do, he sits on the bench outside a small store called The Jewel Box to rest. Minutes later, he sees his first human being.

Legs straight out with khaki trousers flapping, metallic brain joyful in its rush toward what it has so long ached for, Robert Spofforth falls at last from the top of the Empire State Building; falls lovingly, mankind's most beautiful toy, toward the ruined streets of Manhattan below, to embrace them.

The first is from the initial page of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, at the beginning of Thomas Jerome Newton's long and painful apostasy, the second (with its echoes both of *King Kong* and of Hester Prynne on the scaffold at the start and end of *The Scarlet Letter)* from the final page of *Mockingbird*, where robot Spofforth at last achieves his lifelong ambition.

The power of Tevis's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Mockingbird*, and *The Steps of the Sun*, what I have to call their greatness, rests in the many levels on which they may be read: their many-sidedness, the simultaneous balances they achieve, their appetite for not only the visible, palpable world but *all* the worlds in which we dwell. They are at once fables, parables, social satire, contemporary myth, and genre science fiction — adventure stories of a kind. They are also simultaneously, as is much of our greatest literature, comic and tragic. Pitting the individual in opposition to society, they are romances; chronicling the individual finding or failing to find place in society, they are novels. Like most great

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work, *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Don Quixote*, they're uniquely of their time and of all times.

The Man Who Fell to Earth, on its surface, is the tale of an alien who comes to earth to save his own civilization and, through adversity, through inaction, through loss of faith ("I want to.... But not enough"), fails. Just beneath the surface it might be read as a parable of the Fifties and of the Cold War. Beneath that as an evocation of existential loneliness, a Christian fable, a parable of the artist. Above all, perhaps, as the wisest, truest representation of alcoholism ever written.

Mockingbird collapses the whole of mankind's perverse, self-destructive, indomitable history, cruelty and kindness alike, into its black-humor narrative of a robot's death wish.

It was as parables, "more or less what I do in science fiction," that Tevis himself thought of his books. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was "very disguised autobiography" of his forced relocation as a child from San Francisco, "the city of light," to rural Kentucky, of his dire childhood illness, most of all (as *Mockingbird* was "about my coming *out* of alcoholism") about his becoming alcoholic. Yet — and this is their specific, indefinable genius — the novels function perfectly as science fiction.

Tevis didn't think of himself as a science fiction writer. He read and loved science fiction as a teenager, he had published stories in genre magazines, but his first, hugely successful novel, published four years before *Man*, the one that made him as a writer, was *The Hustler*. And when he came to it, he wrote science fiction (here, again, his specific, indefinable genius) as though he were inventing it, as though it had not been written before. Tevis wrote, as Jonathan Lethem notes in his introduction for the current Del Rey reissue of *Mockingbird*, "with a sort of beautiful literary amnesia...refusing genre," drawing novels of character and fable from the tired, much-used forms, turning the worn glove inside out to reveal again the all-too-human hand within.

Briefly then, the facts, the life, from which this autobiographical fiction gathered.

Tevis was born February 28, 1928, in San Francisco. When he was ten, his family went off to live with the father's sister in Kentucky, leaving Walter, who had contracted rheumatic fever, behind in

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a hospital. He remained there, wholly alone, for a year before joining the family. He attended school, feeling always the outsider, in Kentucky, and, following service in World War II (two years as a carpenter's mate), went on to the University of Kentucky, where he earned his bachelor's and master's in English. He then embarked on a teaching career, first at various Kentucky high schools, later, from 1966 to 1978, at Ohio University.

Published to great acclaim in 1959, *The Hustler* became a film classic in 1961. *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, rejected by Harper's, was published as a paperback original by Gold Medal in 1963. In conversation with Daniel Keyes, Tevis claimed that this rejection led to his lengthy writing block; editor Pat LoBrutto, who worked with Tevis on *Mockingbird* and subsequent books, doesn't think Tevis made so much of it. At any rate, Tevis had become a confirmed drinker ("It's about my becoming an alcoholic. I sobered up to write it," he said of *Man*), and for the thirteen years he taught in Ohio, he wrote little or nothing.

Tevis also told Keyes that he'd always dreamed "of being a New York writer, of being in the center of the literary scene," and in 1978, three years after he quit drinking, Tevis moved to the city. *Mockingbird* came out in 1980, his story collection *Far From Home* the following year, both *The Steps of the Sun* and *The Queen's Gambit* in 1983. *The Color of Money*, a sequel to *The Hustler* written for quick money, also came out in these last years. Paul Newman bought the property, commissioning a screenplay from Tevis; for the 1986 film, however, both screenplay *and* novel were junked.

By his own admission, Tevis still had problems writing. He'd also begun confronting autobiographical materials more directly, in a kind of self-dredging that doesn't always imply salvage, and that can prove as wrenching to the reader as to writer. In stories of the period we often see Tevis peering out at us from within.

> Whiskey had left him unable to answer the telephone or open the door, in Michigan. That had been two years ago. Whiskey had left him sitting behind closed suburban blinds at two in the afternoon, reading the J.C. Penny catalog and waiting for Gwen to come home from work. Well. He had been free of whiskey for a year

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and a half now. First the hospital, then A.A.; now New York and Janet.

He'd continue this transmutation of life in *Mockingbird*, his parable of coming out of alcoholism, and in *The Steps of the Sun*, whose early passages rehearse his own childhood of pain, illness, and alienation (and which is, overall, a parable of adolescence). The darkening cities and expended populations of the first, the impoverished, pre-ice-age Earth of the latter — these are the landscape of their author's own post-alcoholic mind: worlds to be retrieved, reconstructed, reinvented, reborn.

Though sales for *Mockingbird* were disappointing, in subsequent years the book has been much praised, taking its place alongside *Man* as a classic. Thus far *Steps* hasn't elicited as much attention as the others even though, as André-Francois Ruaud points out in a rare essay on Tevis for France's *Bifrost* magazine, it's among the most original and successful science fiction novels of the Eighties. It is also Tevis's first wholly optimistic book. In its successor, *The Queen's Gambit*, he turned again from the fantastic to the realistic mode, offering in its stone-brilliant story of a driven, alcoholic female chess champion who achieves redemption (much as *Mockingbird* paired with *Man*) a positive retelling of *The Hustler*.

Walter Tevis died of cancer in 1984, the year after his last two, redemptive books were published, age 56. He had experienced, observed, brought to others and to himself great pain, terrible abjurations; his books gave it all up, took our hands to lead us through the backwash. And yet, like his protagonists, he had borne up under it all, survived, endured.

"It is very bad for people to find substitutes for living their lives," he said in what may have been his last interview, wondering if this might not be his abiding theme. Even if late in life, he said, he had found great joy in it: "I'm really pleased that the grass is green. I didn't used to be."

Through it all, out of it all, blows this dark, strangely comforting wind, this threnody of loss. It is, for many reasons, a small body of work, and one of rare unity.

Einstein remarked that in his life he'd had only one or two ideas. Many fine writers are like that, I believe, making a lifetime's agenda of drawing out the universe implicit

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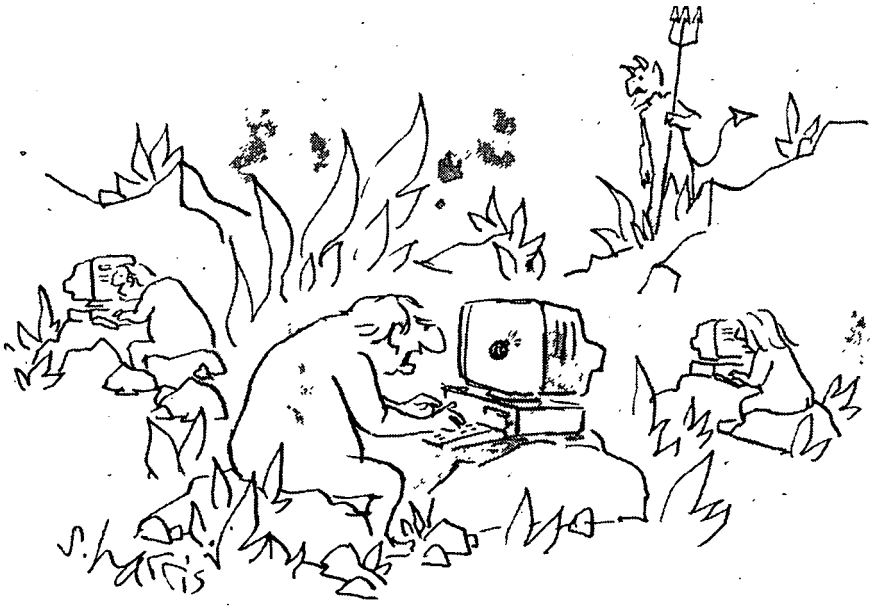
in those ideas. So the strands that run and interweave in Tevis's work: alcoholism, the artist (pool player, chess player) in whom ambition and wound pull like twin suns, the adolescent's eternal alienation, prisons of self and society, bleak futures, Christ figures, redemption.

Again and again Tevis mounted voyages to the alien, inhospitable planet of self, to bring back odd rocks, strange growths, colors not seen in our nature. Again and again he seized metaphors and wrung their necks, making them give up secrets others had not obtained, could not obtain. There he stood balanced, about to fall. He was, as Lethem writes, "a master manipulator of archetypes, an artist capable of delving into the Zeitgeist while nevertheless remaining on his own pure search for himself." His work is unique, with that element of infinite rereadability Nabokov held the hallmark of great literature. Like his characters, though passed through perilous times, disregard and rejection, waking with the day-after, too-late taste of booze, stale smoke and failure upon them, Tevis's work will endure.



"Crashed again!"

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Bob Sheckley has been using fiction to give us unusual (that is to say, skewed) perspectives on reality for nearly fifty years now. His last such gift was "Kenny" in our October issue. His new one revisits Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla" from a contemporary point of view.

The New Horla

By Robert Sheckley

"HOW DEEP IT IS, THIS MYSTERY of the Invisible. We cannot plumb its depths with our wretched senses, with our eyes, which are incapable of perceiving things that are too small, things that are too big, things too far away, the inhabitants of a star — or the inhabitants of a drop of water...And our ears deceive us, because they convey to us vibrations in the air in the form of sounds — they are like fairies performing this miracle of changing movement into sound, and through this transformation they give birth to music, turning into melody the silent rhythms of nature...And what of our sense of smell, inferior to that possessed by a dog...and our sense of taste, which can scarcely detect the age of a wine!

"Ah! If only we had other sense-organs to work other miracles for us, who can tell how many other things we should discover in the world around us?"

—"Le Horla," Guy deMaupassant

The train ride from Concord up into the White Mountains was spectacular. The snows were deep, with the tops of the trees poking

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through like stubble on a dead man's cheek. We topped the range and came at last into Mountain Station. Here I got off, with my skis, my backpack, and my ski boots.

There was no one around to greet me. The little station house was empty, though not locked. I went inside and got on my ski boots, put my shoes into my backpack, came out and strapped on my skis. Although I had told Edwin I'd ski down to his chalet without any difficulty, now that I was actually there the idea seemed less than brilliant. It was late in the day, after four P.M., and the sun was already lost in the white sky. We'd been held up almost an hour at Manchester, and hadn't made up the time across New England. I took the sketch map from an inner pocket, smoothed it out, oriented myself, went over the way I'd go once again.

It had all seemed perfectly straightforward when I'd arranged with Edwin to use his family's ski chalet for a few days. We had been roommates at Dartmouth and had remained friends afterward. He had often offered me the use of the chalet. This holiday I took him up on it.

Originally, I had meant to drive there, and Edwin had carefully laid out the route. But as it turned out, my car was back in the shop with miscellaneous electrical problems. With Edwin's help, I had worked out a different route. I would take the train to Mountain Station, New Hampshire, and then ski down to the lodge.

Edwin had been more than a little dubious. "Are you quite sure? I don't really recommend it."

"It's perfectly straightforward on the map," I told him. The chalet was only a thousand or so feet below Mountain Station, which stood at the top of Standish Pass in the White Mountains. It was a short run and there were no obstructions.

"You've made the run yourself, so you told me."

"Well, yes," Edwin said, "I have, but I'm acquainted with the area. For a first time..."

"From what you've described, there's nothing to it. Out of the station I face just west of north, with the spire of Stanley Church in sight just to my left, and it's a straight run down to the dogleg. Then I go left around the construction site and the chalet — white with green trim — is in sight."

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"It's just never a good idea, skiing in the mountains alone," Edwin said.

"I'll take it easy," I assured him. "I'll snowplow all the way down." If only I had taken my own light-hearted promise seriously!

Orienting myself wasn't difficult. Just to the left of the small station house was a storage shed, painted black. Edwin had told me to use this as my takeoff point. I stood there in front of it for a moment, poised on my skis, checking out the slope. It was steep, but not too steep, a perfect white blanket untouched by any other skiers' marks. There was a dark clump of trees to the right, about a hundred yards down, and beyond that, just out of sight from here, was the construction site I needed to ski around. I checked my bindings, adjusted my pack, pulled down my goggles, and took off.

It was a beautiful day for a run. The sky was white, and there was an accumulation of dark clouds to the east, a promise of weather making up over toward the Atlantic Coast. My skis slid smoothly on the surface, not going too rapidly over the somewhat wet snow, then picking up speed as the incline steepened. I leaned into it, enjoying that exhilaration that the first run of the season brings. It was an easy slope and I was in perfect balance going down it.

After a few minutes I caught sight of the obstruction. It was a mound of building materials, covered in last night's fresh snow, with here and there a gleam of green canvas where the wind had blown away the cover. I was over too far to my right, and now I bent into a sharp turn that would take me below the building materials. The thrill of leaning into that first turn of the season caused me to cut it a little fine. I straightened out to give the mounded materials a sufficient berth, then crouched to build up speed. Perhaps I wasn't paying sufficient attention to the terrain. But there was really nothing to see, since the fresh snow covered everything.

I knew I was in trouble when my skis started chattering on a series of long, slick, rounded objects just beneath the snow. They were like a corduroy road surface, only much higher.

Later I learned that I had crossed a pile of plastic pipes that had been unloaded only two or three days ago, and had been concealed by last night's snow. They had been set down at the lower edge of the construction, and I was going right over them.

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All would still have been well if I hadn't been tucked into my turn. I went across those pipes at an angle. All I knew at the time was that I was crossing a hard, bumpy, unstable surface and my skis were sliding out from under me. The pipes were concealed under an inch or so of fresh snow, and they were frosty and slick. But they hadn't been on the ground long enough to freeze to the ground, so they slid out from under me and I fell hard, my skis kicking into the air, and I was tumbling over them until at last I came to rest beyond the pipes, in soft snow.

It took me a while to pull myself together. It's important not to underestimate the shock of a sudden unexpected fall. For a while I felt as though the mountain had exploded under me. I was numb from head to toe, and it was not unpleasant. But I knew, somewhere in the back of my mind, that when this numbness wore off, I was likely to find myself in a sorry state. It had really been quite a fall.

While I was still numb and feeling no pain, I determined to get to the chalet. It was only a few hundred yards away, down the slope. I tried to get to my feet, and found that my right leg would not support me. I got halfway up and fell. Checking, I found that my right foot was twisted at an odd angle. I also noted various rips in my twill ski pants, and a slow welling of blood from what I took to be a wound in my shoulder, just above the shoulder blade, where the backpack hadn't protected me.

I was not at all cold. Nor was I in much pain. But I knew I was not in a good way, and that I needed to get to shelter as soon as possible. Above all, I had to get my ski boots off before the swelling started.

My first thought was to carry my skis and poles with me and limp down the slope to the chalet, whose roof I could make out at the edge of the fall line. This proved impossible. I was unable to stand up. Nor did I have my skis, as I had first imagined. They were somewhere back up on the slope. All I had was one pole, and my knapsack was still strapped to my back.

I hobbled and crawled downhill toward the chalet, through snow that became increasingly deep as I descended. I felt all right when I began, but soon began to experience a deep fatigue. The day had grown very dark, and heavy clouds were boiling up over Mount Adams. My left ankle was beginning to ache abominably. And I noticed that I was leaving quite a trail of blood behind me. I couldn't tell where on my person it came from

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— I was beginning to hurt in half a dozen places — and this seemed no time to stop and examine myself. I didn't even have a first aid kit in my knapsack.

The forerunners of the storm arrived just as I got to the chalet, on my feet now, or rather, on one foot, with the other raised, supporting myself by my remaining ski pole. Overhead were long dark streaky clouds, what the old Scandinavians called the storm's maidens — those long, thin wild clouds that come out in advance of the main body of wind, snow, and rain. The wind was whipping around my head when I got to the chalet's front door and searched for the key under the log pile to the left. Edwin had been as good as his word. The key was right where he'd said it would be, under a bit of seasoned oak, and I got the door open and dragged myself inside.

It was a modern small ski chalet, bright birch and cedar. An A-frame with two guest rooms, a good-sized living room, bathroom and kitchen in the rear. I got my boots off and turned the power switch near the door. Even though it gave a satisfying click, it brought no power. Edwin had promised to have the electricity turned on by the time I got there, but apparently he had forgotten, or hadn't succeeded.

I was in better luck with the propane. The chalet ran on its own tank. I made sure the pilot was on, found the valve and turned it, and soon had the living room heaters going nicely. Then and only then did I feel secure enough to look to myself.

There was no telephone. I had known that beforehand.

I wanted to get out of my ski clothes. My elasticized twill pants didn't want to stretch over my swollen ankle, and I decided not to press the issue. I could keep my pants on for a while. My clothing was torn up enough to make it no difficulty to find where I had been abraded.

The cuts and scrapes on my sides and legs were painful but not serious, not even especially disabling. It was my ankle that was the problem, that and a puncture wound beneath my right shoulder blade, made by a tree branch, perhaps. Touching it gently, I found it was as big as the small end of a pool cue, and it was oozing blood. Not in a great stream, but steadily.

For a long time I just lay on the living room carpet in the growing gloom of the early evening. I may have dozed for a little while. It was almost dark when I determined to pull myself together.

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Negotiating the living room made it seem a very big place indeed. I was quite weak. I had the feeling that I had injured myself worse than I'd first thought. That deep gouge in my back wouldn't stop bleeding. Finally I gave all my attention to trying to do something about it.

I made a pad with a small pillow and bound it in place on my back with a sheet I found in one of the drawers under the picture window. That slowed the blood loss some, but it didn't stop it. Blood continued to leak out of me and whenever I moved the pillow slipped off. I began to wonder how many pints of blood I could lose without passing out or going into shock. No matter what I did, the pillow wouldn't stay in place. I couldn't seem to get enough pressure on it, and finally discarded it.

The heaters soon took the chill off the chalet. I found two candles in the kitchen and brought them out to the living room. I put them in an ashtray and lighted them. By this small dancing light, I saw the shadows of evening gathering swiftly as the storm struck. There commenced a rattle of windows like the devil's own tattoo. That's the way my thoughts were trending. I was wounded and depressed and wallowing in my own feeling of stupidity, my embarrassment over this stupid accident with the pipes. It made me feel incompetent. And I was worried about the wound in my back. The flow of blood was slow, but it was steady. How much could I lose before I was in trouble?

The wind began gusting up and driving tree branches against the windows. Those trees should have been cut back. I was sure it was only a matter of time before a branch broke through. There seemed nothing I could do about it. There were wooden shutters, but I'd have to go outside to get at them, and I doubted my present ability to do that. I just lay there on the floor beside the couch, and felt the hollowness in my stomach, because I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast early that morning in Hanfield Station. I lay there and waited to see if the window would hold.

It held, as it turned out. But something strange happened. There was a sharp crack and something came through the picture window. It didn't shatter it. It bored through it like a rifle bullet. But it was bigger than a rifle bullet, to judge by the starred hole it left behind. And unlike a rifle bullet, it didn't spend itself in the room. Like some sort of living thing, it buzzed and danced around the room.

I just cowered there on the floor watching it darting around and

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thinking to myself, "Well, this really is too much." I mean, not only had I been hurt, now I was being forced to take part in some sort of weird, perhaps supernatural matter. For what else could this thing be?

"Stop that," I told it irritably as it buzzed around my head. But if the thing, whatever it was, heard, it showed no signs of it. I don't know what it had been when it came through the window, but now it was a sphere about the size of a baseball, and sparkling with many colors. It was spinning furiously and darting around the room like a large angry hornet. It dodged around and slammed into a wall, and changed shape, going all misshapen for a moment, before popping out again into a sphere. I couldn't decide whether something was really happening or if I was having an hallucination. I was rooting for the hallucination, because the supernatural or the supernormal or whatever it was was exactly what I didn't want.

Does this seem over-emphatic to you? Consider my position. I am twenty-seven years old. A junior stockbroker in a well-known Boston company. I'm doing very well, thank you, through a combination of intelligence, steady nerve, rational assessment of the factors involved, and self-discipline. By self-discipline, I mean that I didn't spend much time asking myself why I was doing the work I was doing. I sensed that asking that could open up a nasty can of worms. Spiritually, stock broker might be hard to justify. But I figured I'd get around to that later; in my fifties, maybe, when I'd retire rich and move with Janie to some warmer climate.

I guess I haven't mentioned Janie yet. Janie Sommers. We're engaged. I'm head over heels in love. Not just with Janie, though she's extremely lovable, but with what Janie and I were planning to do with our lives.

It was going to be a good life, a rich life, filled with shiny cars and a swimming pool and a big house filled with excellent art objects. Janie's stipend from *Vogue* wouldn't bring that about. But her inheritance when she turned twenty-five would. Together, we could have everything we wanted. That may sound crass. But how could I not calculate our joint incomes, with a view to making life better for Janie as well as for me?

I really don't want to get into all this. But I thought I should explain why I was so dead set against visionary experience. It would commit me to something I wanted no part in. To giving up the delightful, worldly life I had planned and turning to disseminating the "truth" as I had conceived it.

Once I admitted to visionary experience, I knew I was a goner. I could

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hear myself bending my friends' ears: "Let me tell you what happened to me one strange night in New Hampshire...."

I wanted none of that.

And yet, the logic of visionary experience demands that you spread it around. Tell the world about it. But that was the last thing in the world I wanted to do as I watched the glowing, spinning sphere dance around the room against all the laws of gravity and common sense, and I heard myself saying, "I don't want to be the subject of a National Public Radio hour on strange unexplained experiences, I want to do something I'm good at, stock brokering, make a lot of money, live well."

The sphere took one more brush against the wall, dislodging Edwin's high school graduation certificate, and then it split in two, its halves fluttering to the floor. Something came out of it. Something small and smoky that grew in size and then solidified for a moment into a small body and staring face — staring at me — and then this thing, whatever it was, faded and became invisible and I had my hands full to control the seizures I was considering falling into. ("Yes, I saw it with my own eyes! It was not of this world!")

I resisted the impulse of the true believer and looked at the shell the thing had come in. It drooped, it melted, and then it was gone, leaving behind only a trace of moisture on the rug.

I LOOKED AROUND the room. I saw the storm pouncing against the picture windows. Blown snow slanting past in hypnotic lines, accompanied by the wavering mutter of the wind. Inside the room, there was a profound darkness contrasting with the glaring white rectangle of the picture window. Although the room was in darkness, a few objects in it — the top of a ladder chair, the head of a plaster statue of some classical deity — were still bathed in light. A Rembrandt effect. And the creature or whatever it was that came out of the sphere was nowhere to be seen. But that didn't mean that it was gone.

"You look for it in the kitchen," I told Janie. "I'll keep on checking here."

No, Janie wasn't there. But in some weird way, she was. I can't explain it. I can only report to you how it seemed to me at the time.

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I checked the room again. Looking for the creature from the sphere. Looking for her. Funny how I'd already decided it was a she. Funny how I could sense her presence still in the room, watching me.

Something watching me. The moment stretched out....

And dissolved in my sudden annoyance. I don't want her looking at me! How dare this invisible thing look at me?

What else was she intending?

My mind had taken a curious turn. From judging an event as an hallucination to rejudging it as something real. And now I was really worried.

It had been so much more comfortable when I'd thought it was an hallucination. But I'd had to give up that comforting thought. Trying to force myself to believe I was hallucinating felt like a bad idea. It would make my judgments unreliable. It's madness to consider yourself unreliable. And very unsafe. I was alone there, except for Janie, who wasn't really there. In a situation like that, who are you going to rely on?

I summed up what I thought I knew. I had the distinct feeling that the storm had plucked something invisible out of the air and hurled it through my picture window. The thing it had thrown was let's say a sort of very small spaceship. Inside the living room, the little ship had buzzed around like a deranged being. No doubt it was no longer working right. Finally it fell apart, and something came out.

That was as far as my thought took me at the time. I just knew that something uncanny was in the same room with me, watching me, and I had no idea what that invisible thing intended with me.

Since I had nothing to go on but my suppositions, I decided to give them free rein.

It seemed to me that this being had blundered into this room by accident, and now couldn't find her way out. I remembered the way the sphere had darted back and forth and bumped into walls. I'd seen a robin do the same thing, trapped in an attic window that Janie had opened to air out, and dashed itself to death before we could shoo it out the open window which it couldn't find.

I suspected it was going to attack me.

With a shudder I turned defensive. My hands were raised in boxer's position. My head slowly turned from one side of the room to another.

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Although I knew I could not see her, yet I thought I could sense her. And, with a little luck, do something about it before she did me a mischief.

IT WAS AN EERIE time for me as I sat propped up against the couch, my ankle throbbing, the hole in my back oozing blood, the wind rattling the windows and the darkness engulfing everything as night came on. I couldn't see the thing and therefore I saw it everywhere. It was the odd humpbacked shape on the mantel, the suspicious shadow on the rug, the triangle of greater darkness that peered out of closets and cubbyholes.

I caught a glimpse of it for a moment, then lost sight of it in the darkening living room. And then I felt something at my back, near my wound, felt something wet and sticky on my skin, I turned, and saw it. It was glued to my back. It seemed to be sucking my blood. I screamed and swatted at it, and it darted away and lost itself in a corner of the room.

Janie came out of the kitchen then. "Where is it?" I pointed. She went at it with a pillow, flailing, shouting, "Leave him alone, damn you!" And she caught the thing one solid whack as it darted around, sending it crashing to the floor. And then she was pounding at it with the pillow, and I had gotten off the couch and was stomping it with my good foot. I think we were both shouting then, or maybe screaming. Or maybe it was just me, because of course Janie wasn't really there.

I guess I went a little off my head at that point. I started imagining Janie was there, and I was talking to her, telling her about this discovery I'd made, this Horla. Because that was what I was certain it was — a Horla, the uncanny creature described by Guy DeMaupassant.

Janie was saying, "Look, Ed. None of this is happening. I want a normal life. We can have it all. The best. The summer house in Connecticut, the apartment in Manhattan, the beach bungalow in Moustique. You're making money and I've got money coming to me. We can do this. But honey, we can't put any supernatural stuff in this. You can't go around telling people you had this visitation from another world. Who's going to buy stocks from you if you do that? We don't want to be unreliable. People who've had visions are unreliable. Fanatical. You can't tell what they'll do. And our life is based on knowing very well what we can and will do.

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And what we will not do. Talking about our mystic experiences is one thing we won't do."

I've often thought about asking Janie if she was there that night. If she remembers any of it. If she can say anything at all that might account for what I saw, or thought I saw. But of course, that's getting into pretty weird stuff, and Janie and I don't do that. The Horla is one of a number of things we don't talk about.

Janie is so pretty. And she makes such good sense. And I was in such agony as I sat there, listening to her. Because this thing had happened, the more she talked, the surer of it I became. I sensed that to repudiate it, pretend it never happened — well, that would be a pretty crass thing to do. If I did that, it would be difficult to live with myself.

On the other hand, Janie was right. If you go around talking about your other-worldly experiences, you never again have quite the same relationship with people. You're a zealot, a fanatic, a crazy, someone most right-thinking people try to avoid. You're seeing visions, and that's weird. You're telling everyone, I've found something more important than what you've staked your life to get. I've got news from the other side!

People don't like you when you talk like that.

I didn't want to be driven by the force of an experience I'd never bargained for, didn't want now that I had it, wanted to get rid of it.

"Whatever it was, we don't owe it anything," Janie said. "We've killed it. Let's just never mention it again."

I nodded.

She looked at me very seriously. "It's agreed, then."

I nodded again. And we never talked about it again.

Except that I'm writing about it now. Janie doesn't know. Won't know until I publish it. And then?

I don't know. But I have to write this.

You see, I figured out, after a very long time, just what the creature was up to.

She was sealing off that puncture wound in my back. What else was that sticky stuff she sprayed on me but some way of stopping the wound? Even the doctor, when I finally got to see one the next day, asked me about it.

The Horla had just finished sealing my wound when Janie got her with the pillow.

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Not that I'm blaming Janie.

I figure we killed that thing together. Or maybe I did it alone. Because I sure wanted to, even if I didn't actually do it. But I think I did.

We weren't ready for the Horla, and for what it might bring.

Anyway, Janie wasn't really there, so I must have killed the Horla myself. But in another way, Janie did it.

I'm not going to change anything now. It's impossible to get the weird stuff that happens to you down all neat and straight. But I figured I needed to tell the story. In case the Horla's family — lover — friends — she must have had someone — never learned what happened to her, blown off course by a sudden storm, trapped in a weird room, pursued by a big creature — or maybe the ghost of a big creature — whom she was trying to help and who wanted only to kill her. And finally did.

The Horla gave up her life for me. If she has any friends, family, or lovers out there, if there's any way my words can get to them, I thought they'd be proud of her.

Well, that's the only experience I can call genuinely weird in a rather ordinary life. A story I've never told. Especially that last part about Janie swatting it with a pillow. Because, of course, I did that. Janie wasn't there.

As for Janie and me, we're as well as can be expected.

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M. Rickert lives in New York state where she is working on a novel. Her first story for us was "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies" last August. This new one is a poetic piece of whimsy on the magic of love.

Angel Face

By M. Rickert

THIS USED TO BE JUST A regular barn and now it's a holy place. Have you ever seen so much Godly art? That painting of the crucifix was specially made by Michael Roma who's only nineteen, if you can imagine. God directed his hands, what other explanation is there for such skill? Look at the sufferen on Jesus's face, the blood at his side. Oftentimes people comment on how real it all is. Michael Roma didn't do it. Not really. How could a kid barely out of high school know about such sufferen? God used Michael's hands, that's what's generally said. What's become of him since is the devil's ways. Everyone agrees. We pray for him since what happened with that girl. Folks are divided about her. Some think she's the devil's maid and others think she works for the CIA because the government don't want us to have our faith. If we have our faith, what do we need them for?

Some of the other paintings are done by locals too. That black velvet one over there was done by Anna Marie Tina Louise. How's that for a beautiful name? Would you guess she's never painted before? See how

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Jesus rolls his eyes up to heaven like that. Some say they've seen those eyes move but others say that's just hysterics. These other paintings, people just leave behind when they come. Here's an interesting one in the corner. There's Jesus, look at all that blood dripping from him, and by the blood I would judge he's just stepped down from the cross and standen beside him, well I don't know 'cause he's dressed like a apostle but there's those who say it's Elvis. I'm not sure what that's all about but one thing I've learned, it takes all kinds to serve the Lord.

Did you see that one over there? Now what it is, is one of those styrofoam heads like they have in stores to show off wigs and hats but what someone's done here is made it into Jesus' face and this is a real crown of thorns pressed into his head, just like it was. What people started doing, and no one knows how it began, is they prick their fingers right here on this thorned crown and let their blood drip down his face. So this is the blood of the pilgrims.

I see you noticing the plastic flowers. They brighten up the place, don't they? I don't know when that all started either. You know, it's just what moves in people's hearts. They come here with bouquets of flowers and they drop them around the room and eventually there's a whole room filled with them and they still keep coming. They're plastic so they last forever and we didn't know what to do with them all so finally we started hanging them from the ceiling. There are those that say this is what inspired that girl, or devil, or spy for the CIA to talk the way she did, the one who got Michael Roma turned.

You should see this place when all the candles are lit and it's filled with pilgrims. How much holiness can you imagine? The Hail Mary starts getting said and the roof shakes with it.

Over here is where she comes. Bow your head. Don't get too close. This is a holy place. She appeared right here to Mrs. Vandewhitter when she was milking the cow and she appears here every month, the first Saturday in the month at four P.M., since. You should come back then. It's so different. The parking lot is full and there's music and dancers, and families and folks come in wheelchairs and crutches because she cures them. Well, not all of them. Who knows the reason? Why did she choose to appear to Mrs. Vandewhitter, on this crummy rundown farm and not to Father Christen who has devoted his whole life to the Holy Lord? Why

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did she appear to Mrs. Vandewhitter and not to Harry Miller's son who lays around shriveled up like a tadpole ever since that horse kicked him and when Harry went through all that trouble, with the ambulance and everything, to bring little Harry here, why did he leave the same way he come, drooling and asleep? Who can understand about these things?

She wears a white robe with a blue sash, is what Mrs. Vandewhitter says, and she is T.O.'d. That's just how Mrs. Vandewhitter says it. "Our Blessed Virgin Mother is T.O.'d with you all," she says. Every time. Though really, the pilgrims pray and pray. You can see it by the way they clutch those rosaries so tight and squeeze their eyes shut or look to heaven, or the ceiling of the barn depending if they get to be inside or not. "She's T.O.'d at you all, and she says her son" (that would be Jesus) "is really pissed."

Oh, you should see the photographs. Here, let me see if I can find you one. People leave these pictures of their family, dogs, cats. I don't know what that's about. Here's one, this is what I was looking for. See that cloud, now this has happened many times but most people, they take the photographs with them, see, right there in the sky? That's the door to heaven, you know. It appears when she comes and you can get a picture of it too, when you come back, but it only occurs with a instamatic camera. Who knows the reason?

Faith and God's hands. That's the best explanation for what can't be understood by any other route. Thousands know that. They come here because of it. They spend their savings to get here. Quit their jobs. Leave families. Right there. She stands in her white robe with the blue sash and she says, "Pray." And they pray. "Because the Blessed Virgin is T.O.'d and Jesus is pissed." And who can blame them? Look at the mess we have in this world. Thousands come here and that little girl, all she got is Michael Roma. What does that tell you? Flower angel, my foot.

There have been false claims before. People ain't so naive as maybe they once were. There was the lady from Albany who said the virgin appeared to her in the shape of a potato but she never could find that particular potato again and folks had a hard time believing that if what she said was true she would just up and forget and make potato salad out of the virgin's miracle. There was also the fellow who said he was Jesus but he didn't know most of the bible, couldn't recite a whole Hail Mary, and was

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seen singing rap songs with some kids in Felder's pasture. Then there's her. Sure, she was pretty, nobody will deny you that. Some say she had a glow about her, which, it is also reasoned, is no difficulty for the devil to conjure such a thing and if the CIA can make the whole world believe that Russia is no longer a threat, then certainly it is no problem for them to make a girl glow.

So the first disruptive thing she does is she says, right while Mrs. Vandewhitter is repeating what the virgin has just told her (the part about being T.O.'d), she says, in a clear voice, not necessarily that loud, but how loud do you have to be to disrupt the entire proceedings in a place so quiet as a church? She says, "But there's nothing there at all." This is what's been quoted generally. "But there's nothing there at all." People shifted some, hushed her up. They came to listen to Mrs. Vandewhitter. Well, not even Mrs. Vandewhitter, they came to listen to the Blessed Virgin speaking to Mrs. Vandewhitter who then relays the message.

Maybe you noticed there ain't no pews or benches. More people can fill the space that way. But don't let that throw you. It's holy in here when she comes. They always say the rosary for a few hours before she appears so there's just this feeling in the air. The general excitement. It's golden with all the candles. And Michael Roma's painting is right up there. It used to be right there near to where Mrs. Vandewhitter speaks but it got moved since the controversy. Michael Roma use to stand right next to the painting and it would be fair to say he's a handsome lad. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Good teeth.

So when she says this thing, "But there's nothing there," folks just hushed her up and leaned away from her just enough so that Michael could see who spoke and I heard at least one account that suggests she wasn't the devil, or a CIA spy and it was all just a matter of love at first sight, what with him so dark and intense by that painting of his, and her, so pale and blonde, and somehow sort of glowing. "What did you say?" he said as if Mrs. Vandewhitter was not just then speaking the virgin's words, as if the miracle that was occurring was not that, but this pretty girl's face.

"I said, nothing's there."

Mrs. Vandewhitter frowned and raised her voice. "She's gone now," Michael said, just as though he was having a private conversation and not standing in a full to capacity room, interrupting a miracle.

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"But she was never there," said the girl. "I can see perfectly well, and there was nothing there at all."

The crowd was restless and murmuring. They did not come here to listen to teenagers prattling. They came to hear the message of Mary, the holy virgin and this little blonde person was ruining everything.

Michael sensed this. He stood at the helm, so to speak, and could see the crowd's impatience. "Not everyone can see her," he said.

Even Mrs. Vandewhitter nodded, though she seemed to be bravely trying to ignore the whole thing. Later, I heard her say one word to Emmet Grady who cleans up around here after the miracles. "Hormones," she said.

"Well, I don't know why that would be the case," said this girl, "because she makes it rain roses in my backyard every morning, why wouldn't she let me see her here?"

It is said that you could see the change come over Michael, like his whole posture changed and people even murmured, no, no. Even Mrs. Vandewhitter had lost her place and was up there shaking her head at him.

He goes, "Roses?"

"Yes," she says, "every morning it rains roses in my backyard. Hundreds and hundreds of them."

"With thorns or without?"

"Without," she said. "Shorn, so I can pick them up and never prick my skin."

Michael stood there, considering. There are those who say you could see the way he was fighting inside but the devil was just so strong and that girl was just too pretty. He just stands there so Mrs. Vandewhitter, confused where she left off, starts at the beginning again which is always the same. "The Blessed Virgin Mother is T.O.'d at you all, she said, and Jesus is — "

"What kind of roses?"

"Oh there's Topaz, Jewel, Windrush, Pearl Drift, Lavender Dream, Angel Face, Sweet Juliet, China Doll, French Lace, Maiden's Blush, Sea Foam, Fairy. Should I continue?"

"What do you do with them?"

"Potpourri. Dream pillows. Perfume. Shampoo. Candles. Rose jam. Rose chicken. Rose butter. Rose bread. I give them away to children, to the old, to the sick."

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"Because you are not praying enough," Mrs. Vandewhitter says to the distracted pilgrims.

"Where do you live?" Michael asks.

"In the hills outside of town."

"Why haven't I seen you before?"

"My mother home-schooled me, and after she died last winter, that's when the roses started to fall."

"They fall in winter?"

It was a miracle and a pickup all occurring at the same time. Mrs. Vandewhitter, having raised five teenagers of her own, just ignored them as did most of the pilgrims. Some of their conversation has been lost in the confusion but this is about the gist of it. And, I'm sorry to say, he left with her. Even before Mrs. Vandewhitter was done saying the holy words.

Who can understand the ways of the Lord? That's what Mrs. Vandewhitter says. The need is so great. People just keep coming and coming and they are, generally, wanting. Whatever you give them, they want more. More than the Blessed Virgin's words, or pictures of the door to heaven even. It's like they can't be satisfied. So the Blessed Virgin told Mrs. Vandewhitter to build a gift shop and — Oh, the boy?

Well, there are rumors that he comes into town with bouquets of roses for the hospital and nursing home. Those that seen him say he's grown his dark hair long and curly and wears a little gold earing shaped like a rose and paints pictures of that girl, naked pictures that he sells in the city and also, that he sort of glows. But of course that don't mean a thing. Roses can be bought or grown. And it don't take much to guess what's got a boy his age, in his situation, glowing.

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British novelist and scholar Brian Stableford says that his most recent books include a new sf novel, The Fountains of Youth, *an apocalyptic novel,* Year Zero, *and a translation of Paul Feval's horror comedy* Vampire City. *He now offers us an historical fantasy inspired by the notes accompanying Robert Bateman's painting of "Three Women Plucking Mandrakes" when it was shown at the Tate Gallery. The marvelous myths surrounding the mandrake root set his imagination off in an interesting direction...*

The Mandrake Garden

By Brian Stableford

> The root of the mandragora often divides itself in two, and presents a rude appearance of a man. In ancient times figures were often cut out of the root, and wonderful virtues ascribed to them.... Some mandrakes cannot be pulled from the earth without fatal effects, so a cord used to be fixed to the root and round a dog's neck, and the dog being chased drew out the mandrake and died.... The Emperor Julian, in his epistles, tells Calixenes that he drank its juice nightly as a love-potion.
>
> —E. Cobham Brewer,
> *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable,* rev. ed. 1894

THE MOST EFFECTIVE mandrake-roots are those which cannot be pulled from the earth without fatal effect, and this has always posed a problem for its cultivators. When the great mandrake garden at Philippi supplied the Cleopatra who beguiled Mark Antony, the task was given to slaves who had become too old to work, many of whom were glad of the appointment, but the art was in its heyday then. When I

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worked in the garden west of the Thracian town of Xanthi that had been the life's work of my father Labros, all mandrake-growers — and there were few enough of us remaining — had been reduced to the use of dogs.

The creature we employed to unearth the root that we drew on the day before the catastrophe — it was in the first week of July — was an old hunting-dog that in his prime had harassed bears and brought down stags, but was now so feeble that he barely had strength to respond to the whip. I did not want to beat the poor beast more fiercely than was necessary, but a well-developed root clings hard to its bed.

"Lay on, Pachytos!" cried my father, thumping his staff upon the ground. "Let the lazy cur know who's master here!"

Labros was unquestionably the master, for all that he now had trouble walking without his staff for support. He had never been afraid to "lay on" when teaching me the way of the world, but when I was beaten I never wore a cord around my neck that might choke me if I pulled too hard without effect.

"Come on, old man!" I commanded, as persuasively as I could. "One last effort, and home to Elysium! Fail, and you'll howl eternity away in Tartarus." It was, of course, absurd to make promises and threats of those kinds to a dog, which had no knowledge of Latin and no faith in any kind of afterlife, but it helped to focus my attention. I was obliged to speak of Elysium and Tartarus instead of Heaven and Hell, not so much out of loyalty to our glorious emperor as because my father could hear me. My father had a lower opinion of Christian beliefs than Christian believers had of him, if any such abysmal depth could be imagined.

The mandrake we were pulling was the cream of the crop, intended as a tribute for Julian himself. We had received news three days before that he had crossed the Tigris and was searching for the Persian king, whose punishment could not be long delayed. He had taken abundant supplies from our garden with him, but the ever-dutiful Labros could not bear to consider the awful possibility that he might run out before his noble work was done.

The old dog strained so hard that his tired eyes bulged within his hairy head, and his paws fought for purchase in the soft earth. For a full half-minute it was touch and go as to whether the root would yield or the cur would choke and die with the job undone.

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"Lay on, fool!" my father cried. "What's your right arm for, you useless wretch?"

Stubborn as always, I let the trailing end of the whip fall limply upon the ground. "Once more, son of Arctophonos!" I urged the animal on — and although he could not possibly have understood the compliment that linked him to Orion's faithful hound, he hauled with all his might and ripped the root from the ground.

The mandrake shrieked in bloodcurdling fashion, as the finest roots always do.

I had seen men swoon on hearing such a cry, but there was no one nearby on that awful afternoon who had not heard such screams a hundred times before. The dog, by contrast, dropped dead without uttering so much as a whimper.

It was the soundlessness as much as the instantaneousness of such deaths that had led my ancestors to believe that dying while uprooting a mandrake was a good death — a great mercy, devoutly to be desired by those to whom life had become a burden. I had never been sure of it myself. Mandrakes are, after all, as perverse as they are powerful; I had always wondered whether the agonized screams that they emitted might be stolen from the poor wretches commissioned to uproot them, whose deaths were thus redoubled in their ignominy.

My father hobbled along the narrow pathway between the double row of plants to inspect his new produce. Even he was tempted to grunt with satisfaction when he saw it.

The root was neatly divided, and as near perfect in its configuration as any I had ever seen. Before mandrakes were first brought under calculated cultivation in the days of Alexander, the gatherers who searched the forests of Arcadia for wild specimens were glad if the whole root held the least impression of human form, but twenty-seven generations of my family had succeeded in selecting specimens for breeding with such craft and guile that our own were rarely less than exquisite. The mandrakes grown in our garden always had figures in each half of the root, usually so easily distinguishable that it was immediately possible to tell which was the male and which the female. These two were so precisely carved and so obviously virile — the male a veritable Hercules and the female a very passable Venus — that it would have been a crime to split them.

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Fortunately, the emperor had commanded that none of the roots supplied to him should ever be broken.

Most noble users of mandrakes, even in those days, were only interested in figures of their own sex, valuing them for the most elementary kinds of erotic assistance, but Julian was a connoisseur of sensation. His enemies — especially the Christians whose teachings he had banned — were fond of likening him to Nero and Caligula on that account, but he was far their superior as a general, a writer, and a man of vision.

"Get it cleaned," my father instructed, brusquely. "Then go down to the tavern and rouse that swine Barbatio. In my young days, we had real runners, not scum who work sitting down."

That was a grotesque exaggeration. No emperor had made significant use of runners for a hundred years. Everyone knew well enough that in a one-to-one race a strong man could outrun a single horse over fifty miles by virtue of superior stamina, but they also knew that a rider who changed horses at sufficiently regular intervals could cover the ground in a quarter of the time. The western reaches of the divided empire had been so sorely afflicted by the barbarians that it was well-nigh impossible to maintain the stations closest to the borders, but this was the civilized east which still had its strength, thanks to Julian.

I set about cleaning the root under the watchful eye of my impatient parent. "Get on with it!" he barked, as soon as I paused for rest. "A root like that will give the emperor the strength to crush the Persian rebels utterly. Do you want to be the man responsible for its late arrival?"

It was understandable that my father had such an inflated opinion of the kinds of virility that mandrakes enhanced, and I would not have dreamed of correcting his overestimation. Nor would it have been diplomatic to point out that given the time it took news to travel from the heart of Persia to mid-Thrace, whether by courier or by ship, Julian must have found the Persian army four or five days ago, and would likely be embarked on his homeward journey before a messenger could get the root into his hands. It might allow him to enjoy the tenderest fruits of his triumph a little more, but it could do nothing for the cause of the war.

I did take note, however, that my father had referred to me as "the

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man responsible," which was a greater concession to my age and capability than he was accustomed to make.

AS SOON AS I had the root wrapped and pouched I set off toward the town. It was a good two hours' walk and I wanted to be there before nightfall. The roads were supposed to be safe, but a young man in possession of a powerful instrument of magic never knows when he might run into a brigand or a lamia.

The early evening was warm and breathless; the setting sun hung in the hazy sky behind me like an overripe orange while the first delicate shades of darkness crept upon the horizon ahead. I had gone more than two miles before I saw a man hurrying in the other direction. Even at a hundred paces I recognized Cyllo, who had been one of my companions during such schooling as I had had, and was the nearest thing to a friend I had in Xanthi nowadays. In my early youth, it had been a pleasant town where everyone minded his own business, but in the last five years evangelists had turned half its citizens into petty moral tyrants and made resentful curmudgeons of most of the remainder.

"Pachytos!" Cyllo shouted, as soon as he caught sight of me. "Wait there! Thank the gods I found you!"

I did not pause in my stride. "I have no time," I called back. "I have an important parcel for Barbatio."

He was clearly out of breath but he roused himself regardless to reply. "You have less time than you think — especially if that parcel is what I think it is."

By this time, we were close enough to be able to stop shouting. Poor Cyllo had over-exerted himself, and he stopped before I drew level with him. When I came to his side he reached out an arm and placed his right hand on my shoulder, as much for support as to implore me to halt.

"Why, what is it, man?" I asked. "Are the barbarians sweeping southward?"

"Worse!" he said. "A ship docked at Iasmos this morning carrying terrible news. The Persians took Julian's army in the rear. The attackers were beaten back three times, but our soldiers were direly short of water. Julian was mortally wounded by an arrow and Jovian is proclaimed emperor in his stead."

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"That is a tragedy," I admitted, "but you did not have to race along the road to tell me. I would have heard the news the moment I set foot in Xanthi."

"And you'd have been lucky to survive the telling! Labros has kept you far too closely confined to that miserable tract, else you'd know what this means. Jovian is a Christian, or is said to be, and the Christians are rejoicing that the man they call spawn of the devil has been slain by their jealous god. They have borne their recent suppression very ill, and all their frustrations have burst forth in a rush of violence. They have been busy all day smashing idols and burning the goods of every declared supporter of Julian. Labros has been the loudest of all such proclaimers, and he supplies the emperor with mandrakes! The mob will march on your garden as soon as it has had its fill of common looting — by then it will be a hundred strong, and every one roaring drunk!"

I was sincerely astonished by this speech. I had known, of course, that ever since Constantius had died the Christians had suffered terrible anguish, supposing that all their hard-won gains had been conclusively lost. Every follower of that niggardly faith in the crumbling empire must immediately have set about praying for some such disaster as this. Had Julian's death been delayed another ten years, they might have had no emotions left but relief and gratitude, but after a mere two their wrath was still seething. There was no one in the region who took more pride in the old gods and the old ways than Labros, who was never reluctant to inform Christian passersby that his precious garden was the true source of the emperor's strength. If the Christians of Xanthi had had their way, mandrake-growing would have been outlawed twenty years before; if the looters still had strength to march once they'd supped enough stolen wine, they would certainly march westward.

"We must flee," Cyllo told me. "I shall set off for Kavala tomorrow morning, and you should come with me — Labros too, if you can persuade him. I have an uncle there, and Jupiter still commands due respect in the streets — but you and I must first make sure that we are safe for the night."

He was taking the wisest course, and I knew it. No Christian himself, he doubtless had his own reasons for leaving town so hurriedly, and he probably needed a friend as badly as I did, but it was good of him

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nevertheless to bring me warning. Unfortunately, I could not see that the warning would do me any good.

"Labros will never leave the garden," I said. "No force on Earth could move him."

I knew exactly what my father would say in response to Cyllo's news: *I tended this garden before that imbecile Constantine embraced the religion of his slaves, and I tended it for thirty years while cowards and curs flocked from the old temples to the new. I did not care then that they despised me, and I do not care now. This is a sacred trust, which I will hold until I die.*

"We must make him see sense," Cyllo insisted. "And if he will not, you must leave him to his fate.

"It is impossible," I judged. "Labros has never seen sense in his life, and his blindness is invincible" — but I turned around regardless and hastened back along the road, because I knew that I was honor bound to try.

I had anticipated the old man's response almost to the letter, although — according to my usual fashion — I had not quite foreseen the extent to which he would turn his wrath upon me.

"You craven fool!" he raged. "You hear a whisper of disapproval and you are ready to run! Why did you not go on into the town to rally the true men to our cause? Have you no brain at all?"

"Father," I said, "there is not a single man left in Xanthi who would take up arms to defend a mandrake garden. The aristocrats will buy our figures, and the citizens will buy our powder, but they avert their eyes when they do it. If the evangelists have taught them nothing else, they have certainly taught them the meaning of shame. Julian has been proud to accept your gifts, but everyone who has paid your prices these last thirty years has done so with gritted teeth."

He only cursed me for a fool, heaped insults upon the memory of my poor mother — including, of course, the suggestion that I must be another man's son — and thumped his staff upon the floor with force enough to break half a dozen tiles. There was not the slightest chance of changing his mind.

"Why are you not sharpening your spear, making ready for the defense of your inheritance?" he demanded, when I tried to usher him to his chair.

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"Bring me my sword, that I may teach these angry cowards how to turn the other cheek!"

Cyllo attempted to describe the awful scenes he had witnessed in the town, and did his level best to assure the old man that when the first flush of violent triumph had died down it might be safe to return to the house, but Labros would have none of it. If Jupiter himself had appeared and said "Labros, get thee gone!" he would only have offered him the gift of the mandrake-root that Julian could no longer accept, with leering promises as to its potency, and asked for the price of a thunderbolt with which to smite his enemies.

In the end, Cyllo dragged me away from the confrontation and said: "You must come with me now. If they catch you here with him, all the tolerance and forbearance you have shown to them in the past will count for nothing. You have protected him while you could; now you must leave him."

"I cannot," I said.

"Why not?" he cried. "what has he ever done for you but use you and beat you and tell you how worthless you are? What has he ever taught you but the care and cultivation of magical monsters? Great Pan is dead, Pachytos, and the old ways are dying in his wake; even Julian could not turn back time. You cannot imagine that the mob will leave you a crop to tend, even if they spare your life. We must go."

"What will they do?" I asked him, bitterly. "Will they tear every plant up by the root and make a pyre for them? Count them, Cyllo! I make it twenty-four full ripe and forty still green. The younger ones might not raise more than a murmur when drawn, but even they can hurt a man. Or will they bring a pack of dogs and rope for harness? Of all the gardens in Thrace, this is the only one that has never been troubled by thieves or vandals. How much courage do your drunken ascetics have?"

"I don't know," Cyllo said, in a strained tone. "But I know that this is the worst day of all to put the matter to the test."

I did not doubt him. Although I had not seen what he had seen, I had no reason at all to question his judgment — nor, for that matter, his opinion of my father. But I could not go with him. To do so would have been to confirm my father's opinion of me, and that I would not do.

"Keep going westward," I said to him. "You know well enough which

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houses are safe. Someone will give you shelter for the night. I won't tell them that you've been here. Go to your uncle in Kavala, if you think that best, or find some nearer refuge and return to Xanthi when the fury has died down. I'll do what I can here."

"You can do nothing," he assured me.

"So I have always been told," I replied.

As soon as Cyllo had gone I went to the pens and released the dogs. I did not want them hurt, or used. They would not run away at first, being fearful of the darkness and anxious to stay where they were regularly fed, but I took my whip to them and forced them out into the night, heedless of their plaintive howls.

I had time thereafter to bury our meager hoard of gold and silver, and the few other items of value we possessed, but I did not take the trouble. Nor did I take the trouble to sharpen my spear; I knew that it would be no more use than a hoe. I did not even offer up a prayer, not so much because I had not the least idea to which god it might be profitably offered as because I had no faith left in the efficacy of any kind of pleading. I knew that the dream of empire would die with Julian, and that all the mandrakes in the world could not have preserved its virility.

BY THE TIME the mob arrived the sky was pock-marked with stars and the full moon was as bright as a lantern, but there was still a haze in the air that hid the fainter stars and turned the livid face of the moon a sickly yellow. Although they had light enough to see their way, the crowd brought half a dozen torches anyway, so that they could take care where they were treading and would not be short of a brand if the mood took them to set a house or a haystack afire.

I had done everything I could to persuade my father to stay in the house while I talked to the Christians, but to no avail. I do not suppose for an instant that I could have made them turn back — tired as they were after their long walk, they would hardly have relished the thought of retracing their steps without having achieved their purpose — but I might perhaps have prevented the night's events from taking the particular shape they did.

As it was, it was Labros who met the mob, not on the path that led to

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the house but at the edge of the garden, with the eight parallel rows of mandrakes at his back.

He did not have his sword, which had proved too heavy to be effectively lifted, but that did not improve his temper at all. He cursed the invaders roundly, in the names of Jupiter, Pluto and Julian.

They cursed him back, in the name of Jesus.

Labros told them that he was a great magician, heir to twenty-seven generations of cunning mandrake-men, who could and would blight their crops, cause their livestock to sicken, and strike their children down.

They assured him that they were well-protected from all the devil's charms, and that he had no power at all to hurt *them*.

Labros boasted that he could trace his royal warrant back to Alexander the Great, and that his forefathers had supplied all the Caesars with the finest potions.

They informed him that Alexander and all the Caesars had been heathens, condemned to Hell by their use of magics and their sacrifices to demonic idols, and that all the former holders of his royal warrant would burn throughout eternity.

Labros threatened that if they took one more step toward his crop he would smite them with his staff — and that I, his son, would cut the legs from under them with my spear.

They pointed out that if he were to raise his staff he would very probably fall over, and that his son was not actually carrying a spear.

It was, I suppose, the last observation that drove him mad and provoked him to turn his wrath upon a safer object. He cursed me, in all the names that he could think of — except, of course, Jesus — and called my dead mother a worthless whore.

This caused the crowd to laugh, and one who thought himself a wit called attention to the fact that here was a magician so great that he could not even command his own child.

It is always good when one's enemies begin laughing, no matter what moves them to mirth. That seemed to me to be the perfect moment to step forward and say: "You are right. My father is quite harmless, as am I. We are no threat to anyone. You can safely leave us to our own devices."

It was no use, alas. "*Diabolical* devices!" another voice cried out.

"A crop in dire need of blight!" opined another.

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I came to stand beside my father, and gripped his right arm as powerfully as I could.

"In that case," I said, "we shall stand aside while you do what you have to do. We shall offer no resistance."

They *might* have condescended to let us stand aside, if the old fool had not taken it into his head to yell at them again: "Yes! Come forward one and all! Pull up my plants with your bare hands, and see what the protection of your crucified carpenter is worth!"

After that, there was no chance of our being left out of it. They rushed forward to seize the pair of us.

One of them, who knew our methods, had already gone to look at the pen where we kept the dogs. If any of the animals had sneaked back in search of familiar shelter they had taken flight again when they heard raised voices and sniffed the smoke of the torches. The mob's next move was perfectly predictable, and I took my courage in both hands, hoping that my father might have been right all along about the merciful release of those condemned to draw mandrakes from their beds.

"Take me," I said, when I saw the rope brought forth. "Let my father go."

If my plea had any effect at all, it made them all the more eager to harness Labros and force me to watch. They dragged me away from him, and seized him avidly.

"Fools!" he yelled in their faces, as they struggled to hold him still while the rope was tied about his shoulders. "Do you think that the mandrakes will kill *me*? Do you imagine that they do not know me? They will gladly add their strength to mine, so that I may avenge the insult given to them by this blasphemy!"

The Christians did not like to hear their actions called blasphemy, that being a word they had long sought to monopolize. They secured the other end of their makeshift harness to the base of the nearest mandrake stem and they fell back, save for one who had a whip identical to the one that I habitually used, in my father's stead, to urge our dogs to their final effort and sacrifice.

They let him keep his staff, because they were not sure whether he could stand unaided — but they would have used the whip, if he had been stubborn.

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He *was* stubborn, but not in the way they expected. As soon as they stepped back he pressed forward, planting his staff before him and using it as a lever, straining with all his might to rip the mandrake from the ground. He must have taken note, as I had, of the fact that it was an unripe plant, too green to be lethal in its effect, but that was not why he did it. He believed what he had said to them. He believed that the mandrake would suffer itself to be uprooted, and would donate its strength to him, so that he might become a Hercules and scatter the rabble that had come to destroy the garden.

The root came free without so much as a murmur—but Labros gasped with the effort, and very nearly collapsed. He did not die, or even fall unconscious, but he did not grow stronger either and was forced to lean upon his staff for support.

The greater number of the Christians, knowing little more of mandrakes than their fearful reputation, were astonished that he did not drop dead, but two who ran forward to look at the dislodged root were quick to cry out that it was ill-formed and unready for the harvest, with barely a suggestion of human form in either branch. The rest immediately seized the inference that it was only the state of the plant that had prevented their subtle execution, and two of the ringleaders made haste to find one whose foliage identified it as a mature specimen.

Inexpert though they were, they quickly identified the plant that was now the best in the garden, only a little less luxuriant than the one we had excavated that afternoon as a belated gift for an emperor six or seven days dead.

That was when I concluded that I had no recourse left but violence. I had surrendered so meekly to the two men who held me, and had kept so still since they dragged me away from my father, that their grip was loose and easily broken. They were so astonished by my sudden reversal of policy that they were fatally slow to react. I brought a knee up into one man's groin and stuck a thumb into the other's eye. Neither had much immediate opportunity for reprisal and I was able to snatch a torch from one of the nearer bystanders, which I swung back and forth in front of me as I leapt to my father's side, forcing the men who held his arms to retreat in some disorder. The other end of the rope that was secured about his shoulders still dangled free.

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"Run!" I said, not caring how ridiculous the instruction was.

He did not run. Instead, he used his staff as a lever again, thrusting himself forward to take up a position beside the plant identified by his persecutors — and then he dropped the wooden pole in order that he could take a mature mandrake in each hand.

I was afraid that he would fall, sprawling ignominiously in the dirt, but he was balanced on feet that were half a stride apart and he steadied himself. When he began to pull both plants at the same time, his ancient muscles tightened in a fashion I would never have thought possible.

Where he found the strength I could not tell, but find it he did. If the mandrakes offered their usual resistance, there was no sign of it. Both roots came smoothly free from the glutinous ground, and Labros lifted them both aloft.

They screamed.

Perhaps there were only two magical voices howling their magical agony at the stars in that first horrid moment, and perhaps there were three; I dare not offer a judgment. I can say with certainty, however, that as the terrible chorus extended from one instant to the next *other voices* began to join in.

The evening had been perfectly still while I ran back with Cyllo, and the night had been undisturbed by the lightest breeze until that moment, but the air was suddenly ripped by a terrible wind: a storm more violent than any I had ever seen.

The force of the wind toppled the Christians like skittles, extinguishing all their torches, including the one I had stolen — and the moon grew suddenly dark as a circular shadow seemed to draw across its jaundiced face. The stars trembled in the sky — and that terrible scream grew in volume and in feeling, until all the agony in the world seemed enwrapped within it.

It was a scream that had less pain in it than anguish and remorse. It was the kind of scream that Prometheus might have sounded when the eagle came to tear out his lights. It was the kind of scream that an empire might sound on receiving the news that its favorite son and last hope had been cruelly slain.

I think I was the last man standing, but I might be wrong. If what eventually struck me down was a club wielded by a human hand, I suppose

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that I must be wrong — but I lost consciousness so abruptly that I had not the slightest idea what it was that felled me, and have not to this day. I only know that when I woke the sun had risen in the east, and I was alone. I was bruised and I ached in every limb, and when I took stock of my injuries I concluded that I had been kicked and trampled by many angry feet, but somehow I had not been seriously hurt.

My father's body lay where it had fallen, with a mandrake stem still clutched in each hand — but the roots attached to both stems were crushed and mangled. If they had ever borne the least resemblance to human form, they did not now. They had been smashed by clubs, slashed by knives, and crushed beneath well-shod heels.

The Christians had solved the problem of destroying the remaining mandrakes easily enough. They had not drawn them from their beds, but had attacked them in the ground. They had cut the foliage of every plant to ribbons, and then had thrust downward into the soil whatever implements came to hand: hoes, spades, axes, spears and pointed stakes. Where each one had been set, in careful array, there was a crater full of debris. No remaining part of any root bore any more resemblance to a homunculus than the ones my father held. Had the remnants been powdered they might still have had some commercial value, but I could not believe that the powder would have any real virtue.

When I looked at the wreckage of the garden I saw the wreckage of the empire, and the ruination of civilization. Mandrakes are not hardy perennials, nor can they be grown from cuttings. Their flowers are fragile and evanescent, and their only pollinators are bees that make a honey so fine that sweet-toothed men and beasts have driven them almost to extinction. Mandrake-growing is a very delicate art, which cannot stand much disaster. I looked at the craters left by the murderous barbarians, and I saw a battlefield blasted by the ire of a petty god, who would not be as parsimonious as those who had gone before him in supplying thunderbolts to his faithful followers.

I buried my father among the ruined mandrakes. I hoped, but could not believe, that a small miracle might allow one or two of them to find new life in feeding on his flesh. Then I left, traveling westward. I had some vague notion of going to Kavala and searching for Cyllo, but in the event

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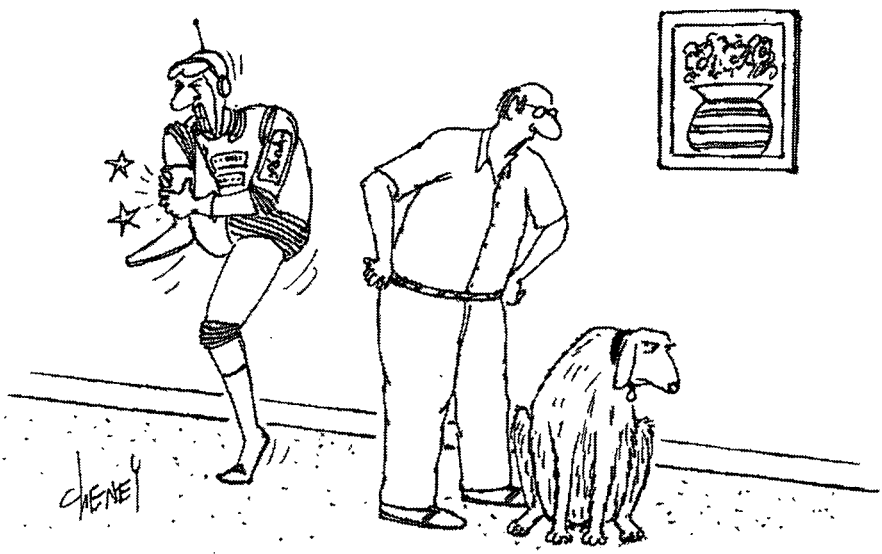
I kept on going, and have been a wanderer ever since. I have been a seaman and a fighting-man, a merchant and a thief, but I have never tended any sort of garden. I have been happy, in my fashion.

I still have the *other* root: the one intended as an offering to the emperor Julian, who is nowadays called Julian the Apostate by the faithful followers of the Galilean. I still treasure it, as I believe he would have done, as a testament to the virility of my will and the potency of my thought.

One day, I dare say, some vagabond will murder me in order that he might grind the root into a powder that he can trade in secret as a powerful love-potion — but I have every faith in the fact that the passion it will induce will bring no joy to anyone else. Like a faithful dog, the mandrake knows who its real master is. ☙



"Five hundred dollars worth of obedience classes, and what's the first *thing you do when a being from a parallel dimension materializes in the hallway?"*

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Factchecker Only Rings Once

"The Red Planet is really butterscotch. After an exhaustive review of 17,050 images from 1997's Mars Pathfinder mission, astronomers are no longer seeing red in the planet next door. 'The red planet is not red but indeed yellowish brown,' scientists concluded in a report yesterday...."

—Seth Borenstein,
syndicated news article.

WHEN THE doorbell chimed I saved my pitifully brief story to disk and stood wearily up. Six straight hours in front of the computer, and I had managed to write only a measly thousand words. I, who had once been nearly as prolific as Lester Dent, reduced to a crummy four manuscript pages per day. But that's just how things went for the average science-fiction writer in this new era under COSTIVE, and I tried once again to reconcile myself to the changed situation.

Still, I couldn't resist glaring hatefully at the stacks of creativity-inhibiting reference books around my work station before I turned to answer the insistent ringing.

The fellow at the door was your typical attaché-toting bureaucrat: as physically unimpressive as an unweaned kitten, yet radiating a glow of self-satisfied power.

"Nelson Nibbler. I'm here on behalf of COSTIVE."

Nibbler flashed his ID, and I flinched involuntarily at the logo I had come to detest: an optical microscope focused on the open pages of a book, above the legend CONSORTIUM OF STORY TELLERS INSISTING ON VERISIMILAR EXACTITUDE.

"I suppose I have to invite you in."

Nibbler smirked. "According to the latest bylaws of SFWA, to which organization you currently belong — yes, you do."

"Come in, then. But I can't spare you much time. I'm trying to

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finish a short story for a new Marty Greenberg anthology, *Thrilling Tales of Quantum Chromodynamics.*"

Nibbler stepped boldly inside, and I conducted him to the most uncomfortable chair in the house. "I won't take much of your time. I just need to go over some revisions for one of your stories."

"Which one?"

"It's the one Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois selected for their new reprint volume, *Patents!* I believe you titled it 'Vandals of the Hyperspace Barrens.'"

"Yes, that's one of mine. But I wrote that story ten years ago, before COSTIVE ever existed. I understood that old stories were exempt from COSTIVE regulations."

"You haven't been keeping up with the decisions of your own writer's union, I'm afraid. Reprints are no longer grandfathered. They need to be brought retroactively up to COSTIVE standards."

I tried to quell my temper. "You're telling me that not only do I have to inhibit the style, themes and speculations in all my new fiction, but that I have to go back and revise any older work of mine that's up for reprinting?"

"Precisely."

"Does this apply to everyone?"

"Of course. Haven't you seen the new edition of Stan Robinson's *Butterscotch Mars*?"

I hung my head in defeat. Nibbler tried to console me. "It's just what the readers demand nowadays. They've grown used to scientific accuracy in their stories since COSTIVE was formed. And think of the students! How could your stories be used in classrooms if they *weren't completely accurate*? Aren't you happy about all those increased royalties from textbook sales?"

I exploded. "It's not worth the emotional and creative pain! These regulations of yours have given even Hal Clement a nervous breakdown! They made Robert Forward move to Russia! Greg Bear now has a heroin habit, and Stephen Baxter is writing for *Coronation Street!* Greg Benford lives like a hermit inside the Nuclear Waste Repository! But the worst of it is what you guys did to Bruce Sterling!"

Nibbler grew defensive. "We were not responsible for Mr. Sterling running amok. Simply scheduling him for a mandatory six-week re-education camp on the technicalities of piloting ultralight aircraft was no justification for him climbing that Texas clock tower with his rifle."

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"You folks practically murdered poor Bruce!"

"Come, come now, we're not that bad. We only have the best interests of the field at heart. Let's step through the revisions of your own story one by one, and you'll see how easy it is." Nibbler took a xerox of my old story out of his briefcase and smoothed it out on his lap. "Let's consider the title first. We propose changing it to 'Some Tentative Speculations Regarding Sub-Planckian Travel Involving Metric Strains.'"

I stared incredulously at my tormentor. "Now that has real zing."

Nibbler red-pencilled a checkmark next to the title. "I'm glad you like it. That's my salient contribution. The other committee members gave me a round of applause for that one."

"Mister Nibbler, tell me, please: exactly what is your own academic background?"

"I have six advanced degrees in subjects ranging from cosmology to paleontology. But I'm just a junior member of COSTIVE. May I continue?"

"Sure."

"In the first paragraph, you describe your heroine as possessing 'a waterfall of hair black as the Coalsack Nebula.' Now, you should know perfectly well that the nebula in question actually radiates at a large number of wavelengths including the visible. The simile is scientifically inexact. We propose this correction: 'no less than 28 centimeters of hair possessing the reflective qualities of refined graphite plus or minus an order of magnitude.' What do you think?"

"It's charming. Any woman would fall into your arms with sweet talk like that. Go for it."

Completely oblivious to my irony, Nibbler smiled and continued. "On page three, you first describe hyperspace as 'an uncanny otherworld, a violent conglomeration of sense-twisting hallucinatory whorls and streamers, a maelstrom of nauseating otherness.' Can you cite any studies from peer-reviewed scientific journals supporting this description?"

"Of course not! I made it all up for the sake of the story! The drama, man, the drama of it!"

"As we thought. In that case, we're going to have to amend that passage to 'a hypothetical landscape whose qualitative essentials have yet to be determined.'"

I slumped in my chair. "Vivid, very vivid. I can almost see the film version now."

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"Ah, if only Hollywood still existed! What a role we could have played in straightening out their mistakes! Now, let's take a look at these equations we'd like you to insert — "

My temper had reached its limits. "Equations! I'll show you equations! Do you know 'eff equals em ay'?"

"Of course — "

I hauled Nibbler up by his shirt. "Well, here's the force of my foot on the mass of your ass, sending you accelerating out of here!"

After slamming the door on Nibbler, I went back to my computer and erased the current story. Then I started a new one with the title "Sweet, Wonderful Surrender," involving a woman named Britanny, the beautiful young heiress of a cosmetics empire, and the complications of her romantic life.

And I gave her a waterfall of hair as red as good old Mars.

"The v-neck shows off your license."

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Every summer, Rick Wilber runs the University of South Florida/University of Limerick Irish Summer School in Contemporary Writing, which probably explains a bit of this story's inspiration. But mostly this one comes from the deeply felt observation running through much of Mr. Wilber's work that there is nothing so fantastic in this world as the bonds of family.

Seven Sisters

By Rick Wilber

BRILLIANT SUNSHINE WASHED over them as they drove the N21 highway toward Killarney and their return to County Kerry. Behind the wheel, concentrating, driving on the left for the first time in years, Paul Doig wasn't prepared for the brightness. He'd left his sunglasses in the luggage he shoved hurriedly into the car's trunk — sorry, the boot — back at the airport.

It was a cloudy, cool day there at Shannon, but he should have known better than leave the glasses packed away. He'd forgotten about Ireland's changeable weather, and now he couldn't see anything clearly.

Squinting into the glare, he saw, in the distance, the low mountain range of Macgillicuddy's Reeks and Carrauntohil, its tallest peak, rising through the surreal clarity into dark summer clouds that hid its brooding height. Even from here he could see the cloud roiling over the top and beginning to move down the slope toward the lakes below. It would be raining there by the time they arrived.

A Midwesterner born and raised, he'd never seen the look of mountains like that until fifteen years ago, the first time he came over. He was

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fresh from failure — denied tenure and thus denied job and future — and feeling very sorry for himself. A month in Ireland, a month of Guinness and endless fiddle and tin-whistle music, seemed like as good a response as any to his academic collapse.

A few months later, back home with his new bride, some hard decisions made following the singular passionate decision of his life, he missed the mountain's brooding presence.

Paul turned to his boy, his handsome dark-haired boy of twelve — blessed with his mother's black Irish good looks — sitting there next to him in the front seat of the rented Renault.

"Look at that, Michael. See the mountains? We're almost there, son. I know it's been a long day."

The boy stared straight ahead. What was he thinking about? What was going on in there, behind that blank stare?

Paul couldn't know for certain, could only guess, but the boy seemed worried and confused. He couldn't be remembering much of this, though maybe some of the memories would come back later, when things got more familiar.

"About an hour more, Michael," he said, keeping the tone pleasant, making it all as easy as he could for his son, relying on his own feelings that some of it got through, some small part of it mattered — the making of arrangements, buying the tickets, packing, changing planes at JFK, the long flight over with its false night, all the typical hassles of modern travel multiplied by Michael's presence, his special needs.

"We'll keep driving along this high pass over the mountains and through Newcastle West, then down into Abbeyfeale and Castleisland. We make a left there onto the N23 and head down to Farranfore. Another left there onto the N22 and we're there."

The boy stared straight ahead.

"Tim and Mai will be waiting for us out in the yard, I bet, ready to give you the biggest hugs. You won't mind that, right? You won't mind getting a few of the biggest hugs from your mom's side of the family?"

The boy turned to look at his father, opened his mouth to speak and a cautious noise came out, something between a grunt and a low, guttural moan. Young Michael crossed hugs off his already short list of doable things some five years back.

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"Oh, come on, son," Paul said, and reached over to ruffle the boy's hair. "You can do it, let Mai give you a little hug, at least. She and Tim haven't seen you in five years. Not since the funeral."

A small truck ahead of them moved slowly, pulling an open trailer with farm equipment in it, some kind of small tractor. Paul would have to pass it. Damn Irish roads, this was a main highway and all they offered was a wide shoulder for the slower vehicle to edge onto while the faster ones overtook it. Cars coming the other way had to move onto their shoulder, too, to help make room. The process required everyone working together in a kind of on-rushing metallic step-dance, absolutely Irish in its intimations.

He pushed up the turn signal to let the truck know what he planned, then began to edge around him. The truck moved over politely in response and Paul zipped cleanly by, two cars coming the other way moving politely toward their shoulder to make for plenty of room. Back home, where things are more competitive, it might not have gone that well.

Paul looked over to his son, who had watched all this impassively, the weaving of metal just another visual input with no apparent impact. "Do you remember Tim and Mai? They came over for your mom's funeral. You were pretty young then."

The same low guttural tone.

"Yeah, I thought you might, Michael. Those weren't happy times, god knows, but they've stuck with us both."

He laughed, sent a quick smile the boy's way. "They made such a fuss over you. Took you to the zoo, remember? They said you really liked the giraffes."

Another low moan.

"You did, eh? Yeah, giraffes are pretty terrific. They can reach just about any leaf on the tree. Always sticking their necks out, right?"

The boy just stared out the window, but Paul chuckled for his own sake. There was a time back then, before things changed, when he used to stick his neck out some himself. Got his first and only book contract — the pop science thing on fractals — that way, writing almost the whole thing before putting the manuscript into the mail and hoping for the best. The way things have gone, he never got around to writing the second one.

"I bet Tim and Mai will spoil you rotten, son. All the ice cream you

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can eat. Pony rides, trips into the national park on a jaunting cart, the petting farm — you remember the petting farm? That's where they have all the baby animals — some walks into the woods to look for deer. You're going to have a great time, pal."

His son's mouth opened and the same ratchety tones came out. A slight bit of drool hung on the left corner of the mouth.

This was never a boy of broad sorrows or joy, never a boy whose emotions you could easily read. And since the accident there have been no hints at all in that face about what's going on inside; just those looks, those few sounds.

Paul has learned to read those slight communications over the boy's life, gotten quite good at it, actually, forced into a sharper expertise in the five years since his mother died and the boy, already hidden in his own world, began to sink deeper and deeper into wherever that place is that he lives.

This sweet boy; this beautiful, flawed sweet boy. Put through too much, really; the nearly closed, autistic world he was born into just adding to his confusion when his world collapsed in even further that day.

A tiny part of a national tragedy, an auto crash, the great American Killer. She was just one of the forty-five thousand who died that year. Nobody drunk, nobody's fault, really, the police said. Just the rain, an interstate and a blown tire on a big semi four cars ahead and then metal sliding everywhere in the rain while their Nissan spun leisurely around and around forever in the dark gloom of a St. Louis thunderstorm until that final, awful connection.

Paul, the driver, lived. The boy, buckled into the back seat, lived.

Paul can still remember every moment of it; how they spun, planing across the four wide lanes like they were on ice. Time stretched out and he felt himself walking to some cliff edge and standing there with his wife and their child, staring at some awful depth, feeling very sad that people were going to die in this and that he was part of it. Then there was the beginning of the scream of torn metal as they hit the guardrail, and then there was nothing.

He came to, in the ICU, hooked up to IV drips, machines beeping around him and the doctor telling him he'd be fine, and that his son was going to make it, too. But Cait, passionate and complex Cait, fell off into

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that nothing, so there was no stepping back for her, the restless one, the dreamer, the arguer.

"Your boy's going to make it, Mr. Doig," was how the young doctor put it. "But your wife, sir. I'm sorry. We couldn't bring her back."

And so Cait was gone and he had to learn how to handle the boy, and handle himself, on his own. He didn't think he'd done a particularly good job of it.

FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE, he changed his life by wandering into a pub in Connemara after spending the day on Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands just off the coast. It had been one of the better days of his life, scrambling around on the ruins of the old Celtic fort there and then standing on the cliffs and watching the sea, all foam and translucent blue water crashing onto the rocks below. He meant to cap it all off with a pint of Guinness and some local color.

Three musicians were working away in a corner of the long, narrow room, playing some lilting song that seemed to go on forever. Paul had no ear for music, but the music seemed, at least, energetic and playful, with one fellow pumping away at an accordion, another playing the fiddle, and a third strumming on a guitar. Somehow they were making that odd mix work just fine.

A young couple walked in, the guy in his late twenties, purposefully unkempt with a scraggly beard, wearing dirty blue-jeans and a brown leather jacket. He walked in through the front door, shoving it open and letting it close on his girlfriend behind him. The girl, dressed the same way and looking just as dirty, stood at the door for a moment as it swung toward her, then held out her hand to stop it, pushed it slowly back open, and walked through, standing behind the boyfriend and looking around the room.

The boyfriend unlatched a small case and pulled out a bodhran, one of those small hand-held drums the Irish use. He walked over and sat down with the trio, waited for a moment or two, then joined in, tapping away with the small mallet that struck the drum's skin. As far as Paul could tell he held some talent, and Paul found himself beating out a similar rhythm with his fingers on the bar as he took a long pull on the Guinness.

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Watching the musicians — you could hardly call them a band — play, he didn't notice when the girl sat next to him.

"He's really pretty awful, isn't he?"

He turned and it was the girl. "Your friend? I thought he was pretty good, actually."

"You don't know anything about music," she said, and smiled at him sweetly.

He laughed. "True enough. I don't know a damn thing about music."

"Here on holiday?" she asked.

"Yes. Just driving around for a few weeks. The typical American thing."

"Listen," she said. "I was wondering if you could do me a bit of a favor."

"Sure."

"Could you give me a lift home. I think I've had enough motorcycling for one day."

"Your boyfriend won't mind?"

"You don't know much about friends, either. He's most certainly not my boyfriend. He's a self-centered, egotistical bastard who doesn't know when he's got a good thing. I don't suspect that after I leave here I'll ever see him again."

"Right," Paul said, and then, in the single most adventuresome moment of his life, he tossed three one-pound coins onto the bar and walked outside to the street and his rental car. Then he drove her home, which turned out to be in Killarney, a good four hours away in the darkness. He didn't mind.

Now, a half-hour later the clouds had edged farther down Carrauntohil. It would be a close race, Paul figured, whether or not they could get to Killarney before the rain.

His plan was to spend the rest of the day and all of the next with Tim and Mai, helping them get to know the boy again, helping Michael settle in.

The boy was here once before, seven years back, almost half his lifetime ago. That trip went well, Michael seemed almost to vibrate at times, a tuning fork resonating to some deep familial connection on his

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mother's side. He even started to speak a few words, struggling to get them out, a sad moan of an "Mmmmm," that they all knew was Mom, and a tongue against the roof of the mouth that they knew, god love the boy, was "Dad."

In those days, Paul and Cait held hope for some improvement from Michael. Never really normal, of course, the doctors had made that clear. But progress was made sometimes with these children. Sometimes they opened up some. They could learn, they could function. Some of them learned to have a life of their own.

Paul had been calm when the doctors first told them about Michael, but inside, where it hurt, he'd blamed himself, blamed the polluted Midwest environment, even blamed God. Then, slowly, he'd come to accept it, learned to shift his expectations, learned to celebrate the smallest of victories.

Cait's adjustment was quicker, and typically volatile. She went from anger and tears to an overwhelming and protective motherhood in the space of a day. St. Louis is a big town, there was a lot of help available for kids like Michael and she took advantage of every one, blending it all in with her own love and painful hard work.

When they came back to Ireland for a visit home that first time, the two of them, mother and son, rambled the hills around Tim and Mai's place, wandering down one boreen — those old, narrow Irish farmroads — or another for hours, walking miles while Paul sat back at the house with his laptop plugged in, working away on what he called his alternate future, the book that would break him free from public relations work, from the writing of press releases and corporate magazine articles and slick brochures.

He'd let science down once, unable to handle the research, unable to get published. But writing for popular readers, that seemed to work. He trusted science, he understood it, and the book, finally, did well. He'd just been unable to follow it.

Ireland looked the same to Paul's eyes. Maybe the country was more prosperous, there were little bungalows cropping up on every hillside and more cars than ever on the road. But the dry stone walls and fat cattle looked the same in the countryside, and the shops and pubs looked the

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same in the villages, bright colors painted on the wooden storefronts over stone buildings, brightening the place up some and contrasting with the solid grays and greens that were everywhere.

Tomorrow, after the boy got comfortable here again, Paul planned to drive down to Cork to get ready for the big announcement. Neal would be glad to see him, certainly, and a day early at that. They could go over the presentation one more time, Paul showing Neal how it would look on the big screen, complete with Powerpoint graphics.

Thirty-eight cc's of bone marrow from the patient, that's all it will take, and then with the new CPS they can grow new cells, grow them *ex vivo* by god, stem cells and all, and then transplant them back into the cancer patient after the chemotherapy.

It's a process that is four times faster, five times less expensive, ten times safer than the current procedure. Time and safety matter to a cancer patient. Less time for an opportunistic infection to get a killing foothold. Almost no chance for undetected tumor cells — infused too often with the old procedure — to carry the seeds of a deadly recurrence.

It will save lives, a lot of lives, maybe. It's the sort of thing that occasionally made public relations work worthwhile. After all the bullshit, after all the endless meetings where nothing got done and the constant compromises and the sense of nothingness — not so much of failure as of a kind of emptiness — that came from the job, Paul intended to thoroughly enjoy the moment on Wednesday, proud of what his company has done, proud of the money it spent on this research, proud of Neal's team that came up with the procedure.

An hour later, the boy asleep over on the left, his face slack, leaned back against the headrest, they came into Killarney. It was raining, of course, occasional hard showers mixing in with a classic Irish mist. The mountains were nearly hidden in the gray.

Paul got to that big roundabout at the edge of town, followed the signs for the Cork road. Another roundabout, onto the Cork road again and then, just a mile up the way, was Lissyvigeen and the small road angling up the hill through the trees. Seven years since he'd been here and he came right to it.

A few hundred yards up the hill and there was the entrance to the

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drive. He pulled in, the boy stirring, waking up with the turns and the braking.

There in the front yard, standing in the rain with their slickers on, holding umbrellas, were Tim and Mai.

"Ummmm," the boy said, staring, as Paul parked the Renault at the edge of the pavement.

"We're here, son. Let's get in out of this rain, okay?"

Tim opened the boy's door and looked in. "Michael, me boy," he said in his best stage-Irish accent, having fun with his American relations before smiling and getting serious, "God bless, son. We're glad you're here. Come on in, come on in."

"Hello, Paul," said Mai from the other side as he opened the car door. "We've arranged a little Irish sunshine for you," and she held out the umbrella to cover his head as he slid out from the steering wheel and stood up, feeling the tension of the drive ebb away.

Inside, a peat fire burned in the fireplace to ward off the damp, and Mai had hot coffee ready for Paul and a cola for young Michael.

Mai took to the boy like she'd done it for years, walking him to the chair at the kitchen table, helping him sit down, putting his right hand around the glass and then watching, pleased, as he mechanically brought it to his mouth and took a cautious sip, then a longer one.

He froze then, the glass stuck halfway back to the table. Smiling, Mai guided his hand back to the table, helped unfold the fingers. Then she tried to give the boy a hug, but he shrugged it off, turned away from her. She just smiled.

The three of them chatted while Michael sat with them, listening, staring. They talked about nothing much, the weather and the long flight and how tired the two of them must be, about the local college where Tim taught physics, about Paul's press conference coming up in Cork. Tim and Mai couldn't believe he wasn't more excited about it.

"But it's a major breakthrough, isn't that right?" Mai asked. "I mean, Paul, this will save lives."

Paul nodded. "And make things a lot easier on the patient, too."

"And you're not excited about it?" Tim wanted to know. "You're just sitting here calmly, when two days from now you'll be in the news all over the world, letting everyone know about this process?"

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Paul shrugged. Truth was — and he didn't quite know how to say this without hurting a lot of feelings, including his own — that he felt trapped. He was not, after all, the researcher he thought he'd be. Not the learned professor, hadn't written that novel, hadn't traveled in outer space. Hell, he wasn't even a fireman, or a cowboy, or a baseball player.

Life had narrowed for him. He was sneaking up on forty years old and he was still in public relations for a biotech company. He put together press conferences, directed a staff of twelve, edited a slick corporate magazine, organized conferences, and pushed a lot of paper. A *lot* of paper.

His one book had done pretty well. He wondered if he'd ever write another.

"It's important, Tim. But I've been in the business a long time. This is just another step forward, that's all. It's not a cure for anything. It's not going to save the world."

Mai laughed. "Save the world? Ask the people who benefit from this if they want to save the world."

She got up from her chair. "C'mon you two, time for bed. You both need a good, long nap and then we'll have a bite to eat and maybe go take our first look at Kennedy's pet farm. How's that sound?"

The boy didn't seem to hear. Too tired to notice, perhaps, Paul thought, and realized just how tired he was himself. He helped Mai get Michael into the guest bedroom and, too exhausted to wrestle with the boy to get him into pajamas, they just snuggled him into one of the two beds. Then Paul lay down himself on the other bed, shoes still on, tie still tied, and in moments was asleep, too tired to worry about it, too tired to dream.

Their relationship wasn't always a happy one. He almost lost her twice. Once, it followed an argument that began over potatoes and nearly ended with a separation. The first time, early on, it came over her infatuation with a professor in the art department at St. Louis University, where she'd gone back to school for a Master's degree.

He was everything, the professor, that Paul was not. Unsteady, exciting, artistic, snobbish, a risk-taker, a fool. It all depended on how you looked at it.

She came home one September day and said it to him simply. "I'm

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leaving," and packed one duffel bag and left. Four days later she was there at home when he got back from the office. She was smiling, cheerful. "I'm back," she said, "and I do love you." And that was all he ever learned.

Michael was born the following April.

LATER, THE RAIN stopped and the sun re-emerged and Kennedy's pet farm, open late for summer's long days and Killarney's untiring tourists, was perfect for the boy. He needed help to get his hand on the pony's neck to pet it, or to get his fingers opened to hold the guinea pigs; but he mumbled appreciatively. Paul knew that sound, and even Mai and Tim could guess it easily enough. Michael, though trapped inside his strange little world, seemed to enjoy this place.

After dinner in the town center they went for a long walk in the national park, over on the Knockreer Estate side. The four of them strolled along the long, paved path down across the meadow and toward Lough Leane. They angled across toward the Deenagh River then, crossing that little bridge a hundred yards up from where it emptied into the lake. Then, after walking through a small woods, they came to the red deer meadow.

Sure enough, there they were in the late evening sun's long shadows, a dozen or more fia rua, native red deer, standing quietly at the edge of the far woods, eyeing the humans carefully as they approached.

Tim and Mai, in the lead, stopped, Tim raising his hand to warn Paul and Michael. A buck, antlers crowning his authority, raised his head to look the intruders over.

Paul held onto his son, carefully pointed toward the deer, leaned over to whisper in the boy's ear, "Can you see them, Michael? This is the only place in the world where there's a herd of these deers still running free."

Paul kept his hands on the boy's shoulders, then looked around. It was a moment of surpassing calm and beauty. To his right, past the herd, the meadow eased into the lake. On the far side of the water Torc mountain rose, the clarity of the washed air bringing it closer than reality. Paul could see white dots of sheep against the mountainside.

A thin stream of cloud seemed to emerge from the mountaintop and then stream north, dissipating in the distance. The sky around it was a perfect robin's-egg blue, containing all this.

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"Magic, isn't it?" Tim asked him, walking up to his side. "I come out here now and then in the summer for just this kind of moment. It's so still."

"It's beautiful."

"It is that."

Paul looked at his dead wife's brother. Shook his head. "I miss her, Tim. I know you do, too, you and Mai. But I miss her terribly." He laughed, looked at the sky. "I even miss the arguments. She had such passion, she *cared*, you know?"

"We all miss her, Paul. But you have the boy."

"Yes, I have the boy."

Mai, listening to the quiet murmur of their conversation, walked over.

"It can't be easy on you, Paul. And you've done wonderfully with him. He moves along so well on his own now, for instance."

"Once I get him going," Paul said with a slight smile.

"Well, yes, once you get him going."

She hesitated, added, "Is there no hope, really, for much improvement?"

"Oh, hell, Mai, I follow the literature. Sure, there can be improvement with these kids. It happens, they open up sometimes, not to normal, you know, but," he hesitated, "more open, more receptive."

"His mother's death must have set him back," said Tim.

Paul nodded. "I thought he'd come around eventually, get over it and start improving again. God knows he's been to enough specialists, enough experts with all the right help.

"But nothing's helped, really. His progress stopped cold. He's just never gotten over Cait's death. I think he's still waiting for the day she returns and tells him in that stern voice to 'Get on with it, Michael.'"

"He'll come around, Paul. One day soon he'll come around," said Tim, and then he turned to lead them all back away from the herd of deer, away from the evening meadow and the easy river emptying into the lake, away from the view of the mountain and the clouds that streamed from its heights.

As the Nissan spun around and around on the wet pavement of Interstate 70, Paul sat, frozen, both hands on the wheel at a perfect ten and

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two o'clock, watching the rain, the road, the onrushing cars, the tanker truck all slide by his windshield.

There was a moment, halfway through the second spin, when he thought he could see a way through the mess, a hole opening between the maroon Buick and the tanker. A little control, a small counter turn on the steering wheel, just enough to get the tires back into some sort of contact with the road, and he might be able to steer through that gap and get them beyond the chaos.

He turned the wheel left a bit, felt the tires bite, turned a little more and felt more control. Easy, easy, slowly trying to straighten her out and head for that shoulder, maybe slide along the metal guardrail and tear up the side but that would be the worst of it.

There was a bump from the rear and the contact came loose, tires back onto the water, the moment gone. A performance car, a Dodge Viper with a young doctor at the wheel, an oncologist, Paul found out later, clipped him as it fishtailed, spinning him into destruction.

The doctor lived.

It was nearly dark when they got back to Tim and Mai's place, but after the long nap both Paul and his son were still wide awake, jet lagged. It was Tim's idea to take them for a walk down to the Seven Sisters, a circle of standing stones from neolithic times. Mai stayed behind, intent on cleaning up a bit before getting all these men into their beds.

Tim, carrying a flashlight — a torch, he called it — led the way down a darkening path. Above, the sky was still lit, a deeper blue now, with the first stars just coming out though it was past 11 P.M.

"It's just down this boreen a few minutes," Tim told them, "Then we go through the pasture and we're there. Ten minutes walk."

Paul followed, holding his son's hand as Michael followed placidly along behind. How he walked so well without stumbling, never seeming to look down at the ground, was amazing. Michael just stared straight ahead and never seemed to trip, his passage calm and steady.

They followed the boreen, took a left through the pasture, hopped a low stone wall, then trudged along through an overgrown meadow. A small copse of old oak trees stood at the meadow's end, and then, as they walked through the trees, Paul could finally see the standing stones in the deep shadows.

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There was a pair of them in front, one nearly ten feet tall and the other perhaps six or seven, both of them four or five feet wide and two feet thick, standing alone, some five feet apart, forming a kind of entryway to the circled stones behind.

"These in front are the parent stones," Tim said, "and the circle," he waved toward it, "is called the seven sisters."

Paul felt his son's hand slip from his as Michael walked over to the circle, stood there at the outer edge of it, looking in toward the middle.

Tim smiled. "They have that effect on some people, Paul. They always did on Cait, you know. We played here as children, Cait and I, hide and seek games, Druid ceremonies, that sort of rubbish."

"Druid ceremonies?" Paul asked. The whole place felt weird to him, deep shadows in the fading light and the air so still, the trees shading them from the hilltop breezes.

"Oh, this goes well back before the Druids, Paul. They guess these stones at about two thousand B.C., maybe even a bit earlier. Well before the Celts, well before the Druids."

The boy walked into the circle of stones, striding with sure steps toward the middle of the circle. He stood there, slowly turned, opened his arms wide as if to embrace the place.

"I'll be damned," said Paul.

Tim laughed. "Here," he said, and walked over to an oak tree some ten yards outside the circle. He grabbed a branch, wrenched off a small part, stripped it of leaves so that it formed a Y shape.

He walked over to the boy, tugged him back outside the circle. "Here, Michael, hold it like this," and he showed the boy how, grabbing the two forks that formed the top half of the Y shape and then holding it out, fists twisted outward so that the stem pointed straight forward.

Then Tim put Michael's hands on the wood, got them situated just so. "Now walk, Michael. Walk back toward the middle of the circle."

And the boy did just that, moving slowly, the dowsing rod out in front. Nothing happened for the first four or five steps and then the end started to dip. Another step and more dip. One more step and there was a hard tug, the end of the rod pointing, quivering, down to the center of the Earth.

"Jesus Christ, Tim, what's going on?"

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"Nothing, Paul, nothing. Michael's just enjoying himself. Look, I can do it, too, here."

And he grabbed another branch, snapped it, stripped it of leaves, held the small Y with the point straight out and started walking toward the middle where the boy stood, mute, the rod in his hands.

Tim moved in close and his dowsing rod, too, started to dip. Another step and in an instant it pointed down, into the earth.

"See? Nothing to it. Cait and I used to do this all the time when we were kids."

Tim sighed, shook his head slightly. "She loved this place, found it very peaceful, she always said. Did she not bring you here when you were over a few years back?"

"No. She tried but I was busy working on that science book. And we thought we'd be back often, too, so it didn't seem to matter all that much."

Paul looked at the dowsing rod in Tim's hands. "She brought Michael here, I think. Maybe he remembers it from then."

"No doubt," said Tim, and then turned to look at the boy. "Right, Michael. You remember it, don't you? Your Mom give you a try with the dowsing, did she?"

There was no response.

"Ah, well," Tim said, then handed the stick to Paul. "Here, give it a try."

Paul shook his head. "No way, Tim. I don't think this is...."

And his boy turned to look at him, mumbled something, a sort of "M" sound, excited. Paul got the message.

"Okay, Okay, you two. I'll try it." And he held the rod out in front the way Tim showed him, backed outside the circle, then started walking in.

Nothing. Another few steps. Still nothing. He reached the middle and hadn't felt a thing. It was all nonsense, some silly fantasy. The scientist in him rejected it. He shook his head, turned to look at Tim.

Tim shrugged. "It's probably self-imposed anyway, Paul. That's what Cait always said. You have to believe yourself into it, she'd tell me, and then she'd do it again herself."

"Well, I guess I don't believe, Tim," Paul admitted, and started to hand the dowsing rod back.

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But Michael was looking at him, mumbling more, as if he were trying to form a word. Paul hadn't heard this kind of effort in years, not since the boy quit trying, not since Paul himself quit trying.

So he backed up, tried it again, walking in toward the center. Still nothing.

Tim had moved around behind one of the stones, leaned over, reached down to touch something.

"Michael, come over here, I've found something you'll like."

The boy didn't look up, his eyes still staring at the ground at the center of the circle; but, he moved, slowly, in Tim's direction, got close enough that Tim could grab him and tug him back behind the rock.

"Here, put your hand down there," he said, and shined the light of the flashlight down toward the base of the rock, then took the boy's hand and, as Michael knelt down, Tim placed the hand near where the cool, mossy ground touched the rock.

"Cait and I scratched our initials in here, down at the bottom of this stone, my god, twenty-five years ago, Paul," Tim said with a smile, "and they're still here. I'm showing them to the boy."

There was a yell, a kind of excited yelp from Michael. Then the boy rose from his kneeling position and stood there for a moment before lifting his right knee and then hopping on the left leg for a moment or two. That done, he lifted the left knee and hopped again, eyes still straight ahead, still staring.

It became a dance, a stilted jig of excitement, punctuated by the yelps. He stretched out his arms again, threw his head back and then yelped to the blue-black sky above.

Paul had never seen anything like that — ever — from his son.

The dance went on for a minute or so and then Michael returned to the rock, knelt down again, then got down on all fours and felt for that spot, found it, and then, rising, turned to look at his father.

"Mmmmm," the boy said, struggling for a word, the sound struggling to escape his lips, the boy struggling to escape long enough from his prison for just that one word. "Mmmmm. Mmmmm. Mmmm," he said.

Paul couldn't move, just stood there and watched, the dowsing rod, that small bit of tree, twitching in his hands.

What happened here? He didn't know. It certainly wasn't science,

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that thing he'd spent his life trying to understand. What was it, then, some fantasy? Some small remnant of Cait? Some pattern in these old stones that somehow connected things up for this boy?

It didn't matter, Paul thought. The hell with understanding, with knowing. What happened, happened, and he believed in it. He had to, as his son came toward him, walking across the middle of the standing stones, arms out, reaching through the darkness at last for an embrace.

"When the hell they gonna get new magazines?"

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Nancy Etchemendy's latest sf novel for young readers, The Power of Un, *will be published any day now. The story below might not appear to be her work, but really, it is. You'll soon see the reason for the unusual byline. (And speaking of unusual bylines, Nancy says that she's indebted to Polish artist and industrial designer Krzysztof Wodiczko for the basic idea of the special cart described herein.)*

Dear Mr. President: FYI — one of many hard copies that have been turning up since last February in various venues, primarily abandoned Hart Carts. FBI and FHDA already on it. Ms. Locust is a senior citizen, so we're being discreet. — R.H.

Dave Dickel's Historic Interview with the Father of the Hart Cart

transcribed and annotated by *Debbie Jean Locust*

THE FOLLOWING IS AN unauthorized transcript of the historic "Hart Cart" segment of the February 19, 2030 *Dave Dickel Show,* part of which was aired live from Microsoft's Media Land Campus, Mountain View, California. Participants in the "Hart Cart" segment were Mr. Dickel, his interviewee Harold Hart, and (at the request of the Federal Housing Dream Agency) Mr. Hart's Assigned Media Liaison, Erica Cunning. Present in the studio audience was I, your faithful reporter, Debbie Jean Locust, Underground Activist for the Electronically Deprived.

[Segment opens. We see three individuals seated conversationally on expensive-looking overstuffed leather furniture, the kind a lot of us owned once but never will again. It is infuriating.

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[Our host, Mr. Dickel, has baby pink skin, does not look a day over thirty-five, and is turned out in a Brooks Brothers suit, Italian shoes, and a trendy silk Spiderman tie. He is seated in a large chair on the right.

[On a love seat to the left we see a small muscular man about the same age as Dickel, with glasses and wild curly hair that makes him look like he just got finished having frenzied sex (though God knows who in her right mind would let such a true creep touch her), none other than the notorious Harold Hart. He is not at all what you would expect. He has on wrinkled tan cotton slacks and a wild print shirt with a string tie. He looks so harmless. At this point in the interview, I find it hard to believe he is who he is.

[Beside Hart sits Erica Cunning, his Assigned Media Liaison. Erica Cunning is a perfect name for her, in my humble opinion, though Erica Weasel would probably work pretty well, too. She is quite a piece of work, very tailored and smooth, with a face as tricky and hard to read as the Statue of Liberty's.]

DICKEL: And now, ladies and gentlemen, will you please welcome Mr. Harold Hart, renowned designer and inventor of the Hart Cart, and his Assigned Media Liaison, the charming Ms. Erica Cunning. [Dickel puts a sardonic twist on the words "Assigned Media Liaison." We all know it's just a euphemism for Media Cop. Hesitant applause and even a couple of "boos" from the audience, pretty much what you'd expect, given what Mr. Hart appears to have done to this country.]

DICKEL: [Cocking eyebrow, smiling slightly.] Oh, dear, Mr. Hart. Your name may be a household word in America, but it looks as if your popularity ratings may be even lower than the President's. [Chuckles; audience chuckles, too.]

[Hart shifts uncomfortably on the leather love seat. He keeps running his hand over the arm nearest him, as if he loves the way it feels. He opens his mouth to say something, but Dickel beats him to the punch.]

DICKEL: Be that as it may. I know there are people all across the country who are anxious to hear the whole story of the Hart Cart and its

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phenomenal success. Harry, you don't mind if I call you Harry, do you? Why don't you begin by telling us a little bit about how you first got the idea for the Cart.

HART: Well, you know how ideas are. I get them all the time. I've been getting them all my life. And I don't always know exactly where they come from, or they come from a lot of different places and then stick together in a big thing in my brain. You know?

[Dickel and Cunning chuckle. Audience titters. They don't know what to make of this guy, and so far, neither do I. Not the kind of person who could be predicted to turn everybody's life upside down.]

DICKEL: I'm not certain I've had that experience, Harry. But I think I can imagine it. Please go on.

HART: [He looks at Cunning with his eyebrows scrunched up. After she smiles and blinks at him, he licks his lips. He clears his throat.] You have to remember, this was ten years ago, when I first started thinking about the Cart. I had only been out of college for a little while, but I was having a lot of fun working for The Brainstorm Group over in Palo Alto. Mostly on packaging concepts for the early DNA-based computers. Gray-matter cases, prosthetic servers, stuff like that.

DICKEL: The Brainstorm Group? Weren't they involved in the army/armadillo affair?

CUNNING: Dave, if I could just set the record straight, that's a common misapprehension. It's true that Thurber Witherspoon worked for Brainstorm for a time, but that was back around the turn of the century. The armadillo affair happened much later, after he had established his own company on the East Coast, Witherspoon Transformation and Alteration.

HART: [Leaning forward, elbows on knees, grinning and playing with his string tie.] Yeah, that was so twisted, wasn't it? Thurby accidentally turning all those army guys into armadillos.... I've wondered a lot about

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how it would feel to have that happen to you. I kind of wanted to try it, you know, to see....

[Cunning lays her hand none-too-softly on Hart's arm. Hart frowns at her, then runs his finger around the inside of his collar.]

HART: Well, I guess I didn't really want to try it. I kind of just thought I did. Or something. [He smiles at Cunning. This smile is hard to describe — very toothy and stiff. It makes him look like the front of a Malgorzata maglev. By this time, something like a little bell is going off in the back of my head. It says, when a man smiles like a Malgorzata, you can be sure something strange is going on.]

DICKEL: But getting back to the Cart, how did you first get the idea for it?

HART: Right. So, I was working for this product design company, Brainstorm, in Palo Alto. And Palo Alto was at that time a really nice, rich little town. You know, close to Stanford, full of smart people loaded with bucks. I mean, there were six different places downtown where you could buy precision-brewed gourmet cappuccino for seven smackers a cup, and they were packed all the time. There were four pharmacopoeias selling the best varieties of select natural coke for such high prices that they could throw in a hand mirror and a dollar bill with every purchase, and they still had so much business that people stood in line outside their doors. Wow, those were the days, huh?

[Dickel nods, a faraway look in his eyes. Camera pans to show faces of audience, ranging from reflective to morose. A woman dabs at her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse. It makes me think, too, about the way life used to be before the goddamned Hart Cart.]

HART: But even then, things were beginning to crumble. I mean, that was 2020. I guess about half of the baby boomers were retired by then. Social Security hadn't gone down the drain yet, but it was on its way. Even the government was beginning to admit that. Our parents were all retiring and selling their houses and their stocks and bonds at the same time, so prices

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of real estate and mutuals and stuff were in the [bleep]. Can I say [bleep] here? Oh, well, you know, in the toilet.

DICKEL: Social Security! That's right, isn't it? Everybody remember Social Security? [Grins at the audience. The audience hisses and stamps their feet in return, your faithful reporter included. Asswipe government.]

CUNNING: Dave, if I could just interject something here. I don't think it's fair to blame the government for the failure of Social Security. This is a democracy, after all. We could have changed it if we had really wanted to.

[Predictably, the audience goes wild. You know, this is a really dumb thing for Cunning to say in front of an audience half of whom are obviously over retirement age. We did, after all, elect new parties to power every couple of years during the decade before Social Security went under. And none of them managed to do anything to stop it. There's only a little of the mob scene on the taped version most people saw, a quick flash of a woman with really bad teeth throwing something toward the set. The picture cuts to a commercial message, and when the show comes back on everything looks the same as before except Cunning's hair is slightly messed up. What actually happened is that people threw things at her and Hart, mostly stuff we had found in dumpsters that was too gross to eat, even for us.]

DICKEL: So, Harry, you were saying? About how you got the idea for the Cart, right about the time when...you know...things were starting to crumble, as you say?

[Hart's lips are pressed tight. He closes his eyes hard, then opens them again, blinking. His forehead looks like a maniac farmer plowed it, and his upper lip is shiny. He might as well be wearing a chartreuse neon sign that says I AM ABOUT TO LOSE MY COOL, BIG-TIME. I feel like yelling, "Welcome to the real world, Harry."]

HART: I'm sorry. I know this is not what I'm supposed to say, and I'm probably going to lose my pay-off, but I just can't take it anymore. Do you

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know how it feels to have this much hatred directed at you? To have people spit before they say your name? People should know the real story. I'm getting blamed for this, and all I really wanted to do was help. This is not my fault, you know? I'm going to tell the truth.

[The studio is completely silent. You can almost hear the audience's hair standing on end. The truth. It's practically a forgotten concept. Everybody suspects that the government and corporate interests and the big studios pay people on programs like this to mouth approved versions of reality. But this is the first time anybody has come right out and confirmed it on the public airwaves. Not only that. It's Harold Hart, perhaps the most vilified individual of the century, who has just said this thing. It's as if somebody has whacked us in the head with a crowbar. Ms. Fast-on-her-feet Cunning is the first to regain her composure.]

CUNNING: Harry, you really seem awfully tired, probably too tired to continue this interview right now. [She smiles at the audience.] Mr. Hart suffers from high blood pressure. [Gives Hart an impaling stare.] Don't you, Harry? So with your permission, Dave, shall we just cut this short so Harry can get some much-needed rest?

DICKEL: [Who has been lightly tapping his front teeth with his index fingernail.] What do you think, Harry?

CUNNING: Dave!

DICKEL: [Tilting his head and frowning.] Why not, Erica? Aren't you a little sick of it, too? Doesn't the truth sound, I don't know, refreshing?

[Nobody moves. Nobody even dares to breathe. Once in a lifetime, you might be present at a truly historic moment. Here it is. Live. This oopsie is too big to be glossed over with a commercial. Besides, it's pretty clear that the studio crew also finds the idea of the truth refreshing. There's a lot of off-camera murmuring. It's rebellion in the ranks. It's like being a kid in the sixties again, and the spirit is catching as hell!]

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CUNNING: [Looking like a cornered sow.] Dave, this is not the arrangement we have. The arrangement we have is that...you're not supposed to...what is the matter with you people? This is a very sensitive issue. We thought you understood that. I want this program off the air right now! The show is over.

[Camera pulls back so that much of the crew and other cameras are visible. Dickel looks around at the audience and the crew. I figure Thomas Jefferson and John Hancock must've looked kind of like this when they signed the Declaration of Independence. Knowing their peters were in the ringer, but beyond caring. Nobody shows any sign of following Ms. Cunning's instructions.]

DICKEL: Mr. Hart, please go on.

CUNNING: [Truly pink in the jowls.] Harold Hart, this is preposterous. If you say one more word...

DICKEL: [Raises his hand, palm outward toward Cunning.] Erica, don't interrupt. Harry, tell us the truth about the Cart. Clear your name if you can.

HART: [Shaking his head.] The truth. Does anybody remember the truth about what it was like? Sometimes I wonder. The streets were crawling with homeless people. Good people, who had worked all their lives and paid taxes and thought they were all set for their golden years. I don't think very many people believed the crash would really happen, though when you look back, it's hard to imagine why not. Supply and demand, you know? All the markets were flooded. I guess everybody thought, oh well, at least we've still got our Social Security. Right. And I'm my own grampa.

I mean, shall we talk about the truth? I was working my butt off, sharing a rental with thirty other people and barely scraping by. The banks were repossessing houses and selling them off to the internationals as fast as they could just to stay afloat. My own parents were camping under a bridge! Upper middle class professionals in their day. Their retirement money turned out to be about a third of what they expected. Then the

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Responsibility Party got in control of things, and their whole platform was "self-reliance and personal responsibility," and [bleep] you if you didn't plan well enough for this unbelievable future. The only thing that ever comes out of their mouths is some variation of, "It's not our problem."

CUNNING: [Her hair is really beginning to fall down now, and her cheeks are very rosy. What I think of most when I look at her is a melting ice cream cone. When's the last time I had one of those, melting or otherwise?] Really, to be fair about it, we weren't elected to power until the year after Social Security became obsolete.

HART: See what I mean? [Audience chuckles. Everyone is warming to this strange little man, who we are beginning to think is maybe not the bastard described on the official newsurls.] Excuse me, Erica, but *of course* the Responsibility Party was responsible. You guys, including your amazing, wonderful Federal Housing Dream Agency, are the ones who said, "Let's find the cheapest possible solution." So in walks dumb Harold Hart, everybody's patsy...

CUNNING: Mr. Hart, that's really uncalled for. Nobody used you as a patsy. You had a brilliant idea whose time had come, and you were more than happy to see us implement it.

HART: The [bleep] I was! If I had known what you clowns were going to do with it...

CUNNING: All right, that's enough. I demand that you keep to the terms of our agreement on pain of arrest and prosecution. [She seems to be addressing both Hart and Dickel at this point. The camera angle is unflattering and shows tiny drops of spit flying from her mouth as she speaks. She's pretty excited. She sticks her hand inside her shirt and feels around like a cockroach on caffeine, comes out with a wallet and flips it open to reveal a big gold badge of some kind. Didn't I say we all knew it? Media Cop!] Under my authority as a United States Government Media Marshall, I hereby issue an injunction against the further airing and taping

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of this interview due to its indecent and dangerous nature as defined in Federal Statute and by the United States Supreme...

DICKEL: Excuse me, but this is my show, Erica, and this is ostensibly still a free country. Or are you saying this is not still a free country? George, keep the live hook-up hot! [He has his chin stuck out, and judging from the fact that his face is no longer pink, but red, he is trying really hard to remember that he's never supposed to slug his guests, especially those who work for the government. Response from the audience is a dull, grumbling roar. I sense that we're all beginning to feel a little protective toward this Hart character.]

CUNNING: I never said it wasn't a free country. Of course it's still a free country.

DICKEL: Then we have every right to let Mr. Hart say what he has to say. [Lifts an eyebrow and tips his head toward Hart. Meanwhile, Cunning is speaking quietly into her wristlink. Dickel and everybody else understands the interview is going to end in a few minutes, free country or not.]

HART: [Talking fast.] I'm just a designer. An inventor, you know? A person with a soft spot. That's what kills me the most about the situation I'm in right now. People think I'm this total [bleep]ing [bleep]. But I'm not. I hate to see people suffer. I think it's wrong. I mean, really wrong in a very basic way.

You know, I was walking around rich little Palo Alto. And right there, wandering up and down the same sidewalks, squatting right next to these people with the imported leather shoes and Rolex wristlinks and self-guided Porsches were our parents. You understand what I'm saying? Living on the streets, dressed in rags, hauling their belongings around in garbage bags and begging! And they weren't the only ones. By that time, in case nobody cares to remember anymore, almost twenty-five percent of the population had no place to live. I mean, think about it. Seventy-five million people sleeping in different doorways every night. It was getting worse and worse, and there was no end in sight.

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CUNNING: I think I have a few rights here, too. And I think I should point out that begging is no longer such a problem. Thanks to the Responsibility Party's feeding voucher program and our used clothing drives, which really work. And frankly, thanks to our Hart Cart Program as well! Let's be fair here....

HART: You know, Erica, I hate that. I really hate that. The Hart Cart Program is a fraud, and you know it. It was never supposed to be permanent. And I resent the fact that the Responsibility Party has used me as a handy scapegoat...

CUNNING: Don't play dumb, Harry. Everybody knows you made a lot of money...

HART: [Leaping to his feet.] Oh right! Everybody knows the government always honors its word to the little guy. If I made so [bleep]ing much money then why the [bleep] am I living in a [bleep]ing Hart Cart?

[Audience is yelling and cheering. Cunning's voice is drowned out. Nobody can believe that Harold Hart, the person we thought was responsible for our misery, has just admitted his own invention is a delusion and a snare. Not only that, but he, the Great Hart, lives in a Cart himself, which none of us imagined, never in our wildest dreams!]

DICKEL: Okay, okay, everybody, I think we all know there's very little time. We're all very excited about this, but I really want to hear the rest of Harry's side of this very complicated story. Don't you?

[Audience quiets somewhat. People are smiling at each other, punching the air. Occasional cries of, "Way to go, Harry," echo through the studio.]

HART: So I watched these homeless people day after day. I got to know quite a few of them. I was interested, and curious about their life style. I knew from talking to my own parents, whenever I could find them, which wasn't often, what some of the [bleep]iest things about being homeless

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were. No way to get out of the sun or rain. No place to sleep. No way to stay warm. No privacy. No way to stay clean. No way to stay in touch with the rest of the world. And this constant worry that somebody would run off with the few things you'd managed to accumulate for yourself, because there was no safe place to keep them.

A lot of these people had stolen grocery carts — for collecting recyclables, which was sometimes their only source of income, and for hauling their belongings around. It just came to me one day, why not design a cart specifically for the homeless person?

That's how it started. In the beginning I wasn't thinking in terms of creating actual homes for the homeless. But the more I got into it, the more I realized, hey, if I do this right, I could build something pretty comfortable for a very low price. It was just a way to ease the pain of life on the streets, a stop-gap kind of thing. It was never meant as a permanent solution.

DICKEL: So how did that happen? How did it become a permanent solution?

HART: [Runs both hands through his hair and stares at the floor for a minute.] You know, I've asked myself that question a lot. And I don't know. I really don't know. It gives me a headache.

CUNNING: If I may, I think I could help Mr. Hart answer that. [Hart glances at her sideways with his eyebrows raised.]

DICKEL: All right, Erica. What is your theory about how the Hart Cart became a permanent solution to the nation's housing problem?

CUNNING: The Hart Cart didn't just work. It worked *beautifully*. Every homeless person who saw a Hart Cart wanted to own one. Imagine life on the street, as Mr. Hart has just described it. You are constantly tired and cold and filthy. You have to urinate and move your bowels on the street or in public restrooms, where you are unwelcome. If you're hungry, you have to wait till a Feeding Station opens. You're getting mugged all the time, especially when you sleep. There's no way your friends and family can contact you except in person.

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And here comes the Hart Cart! Your home on wheels! You can push it anywhere you want to go. It folds out into an enclosed, armored bed with a window and blinds. It has lockable storage compartments. With the twist of a few handles, it transforms into a privacy cubicle for bathing or toilet. It has solar batteries for powering a lamp, a hot plate, or a dumb terminal. It even has a built-in barbecue!

Most important of all, it is affordable. Far more affordable than trying to provide standard housing. Like Mr. Hart, President Biffing saw a golden opportunity to do something substantial about a terrible, inhumane situation. Balance the budget by eliminating demeaning social programs and replacing them with Hart Carts and Feeding Stations! Use the money to raze obsolete residences and replace them with beautiful, revenue-building corporate campuses. It was the right thing to do. No question about that.

[Maybe Cunning is not such a great name for this woman after all. She is so out of touch with reality, she doesn't understand that our brains work as well as hers, doesn't understand how easy it is to see past the veneer of officialese she learned at some high-brow university or wherever. We've known it deep down, ever since Vietnam, that it wasn't really a democracy anymore, but a plutocracy where the people with the most money got their way and everybody else got flushed. She doesn't understand how it hurts to hear her say it that way, so proudly, so pleased, as if it really *was* the right thing to do. Maybe she believes it herself. But we know better, and there's a sound coming from us, softly at first, like the weeping of children in the rain, then louder and louder as the thunder of our rage lets loose, and our tears become a downpour.

[We, the audience, with our frayed clothes and sunburns and rotten teeth, are on our feet. Up on stage, so are Dickel and Hart and Cunning. Even the technical crew have their fists held high. Dickel's face is pale and strangely happy. Hart is crying. Cunning looks like she needs a bathroom. Almost as one, we begin to move toward the front of the studio. You can feel fury in the air, almost smell it, like ozone or a chemical fire. We're not thinking anymore. We just want to tear Cunning, and the government with her, to pieces. Behind us, the Federal Police swarm through the studio doors, billy clubs and stun guns at the ready.]

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

WHEN TECHNOLOGY FAILS

THE forlorn silence from Mars in December 1999 told us of the third failed Mars expedition in a decade. We want to know why, but in this latest case, probably never will.

Since 1960 the U.S., U.S.S.R. and Russia have sent twenty-nine missions toward Mars, and only eight worked well. The score is lopsided: U.S.A. at eight out of thirteen, the U.S.S.R. and Russia stand at zero for sixteen. The Russians apparently have not yet mastered the hard arts of navigation, reliability in spacecraft design, and hands-on computer maintenance. Most embarrassing, their Phobos probe spun out of control because one technician sent a command that was wrong by one digit.

Of the last five U.S. shots, three failed. The Mars Observer died at Mars rendezvous in the early 1990s, falling silent suddenly — apparently, a panel decided, because a valve stuck when fuel poured through it, and the plumbing blew open, throwing the billion-dollar craft into a tumble it could not correct.

That loss called into question the faster-better-cheaper philosophy that guides NASA now. Craft sent since then have cost about $125 million, most of it for the launch rocket. But when they failed, too, NASA began to worry.

The case of the September 1999 Mars Climate Orbiter is embarrassing, for many reasons. If the Orbiter had been an airplane, its loss would be ascribed in accident investigators' lingo as a "controlled flight into terrain" — the first for a space vehicle. Complex spacecraft have pointed their instruments the wrong way, failed to open antennas, short-

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circuited, leaked and exploded — but they haven't been mis-flown. Until now — and the reasons why are instructive.

Everybody now knows that "the" cause was a failed translation of English units of thrust (foot-pounds; the force needed to move a pound a foot in a second) to metric (Newtons, which move a kilogram a meter in a second). True, but not the whole story. The metric conversion mistake was a classic hand-off goof, one side believing that the other was thinking the same way, but not checking.

All spacecraft have to keep their bearings against deflecting forces. Their antenna swings, sunlight pressure, and even the tiny push of the solar wind (that gale of particles blown out from the sun's plasma) — all deflect the craft. That's why most spacecraft spin, to keep their direction more or less fixed.

To adjust its "attitude," or orientation in space, the craft uses "momentum wheels" — small gyroscopes that store angular momentum in isolation, until it's needed to turn the craft. These little tops spin at up to 3000 revolutions per minute, one gyroscope for each of three axes in direction.

Another way to move a spacecraft is to thrust with gas jets. The ground team turns on a jet for a few seconds, calculated to correct a straying aim. Both methods get used to make the complicated changes along a long interplanetary orbit.

In that translation, from seconds of thrust to change of momentum, lay the error. Lockheed, who built the thrusters, used English units, which differed by a factor of 4.45 from the metric. This may sound big, but it isn't gross. The bursts were only a few seconds, but when you're adjusting several times a day for six months, they can add up.

Why so many adjustments? The Orbiter had two big appendages sticking out of it, the high-gain antenna for talking to Earth, and its solar panels. Those panels were about as long as a living room (5.5 meters), and the pressure of sunlight alone on them pivoted the spacecraft continually. That had to be fixed, daily.

Why such big panels? Because spacecraft now fly without use of the dreaded N-word, *nuclear*. Those huge panels provided a kilowatt of power, about what your refrigerator uses. A small nuclear cell would have weighed much less and provided more power. It would have lasted far longer in orbit at Mars, too.

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But the staffs of congressional committees are political to the bone, and they're scared of the N-word because the public has been terrified of it for decades. Nuclear power, nuclear weapons, even nuclear medicine; one wonders what they think of the nuclear family. Using isotopes on cancer patients has a tough time in some communities; Berkeley, California, banned such treatments, and has big signs up at the city line proclaiming so. But when I asked a friend who is a cop there, he allowed with a laugh that of course they all look the other way when Alta Bates hospital uses them, and brings in more short-lived radioactive isotopes for the purpose.

Some folks in my own town of Laguna Beach tried to follow suit, and the measure lost only after a long hearing where I and one other physicist testified against a hostile crowd of a hundred. (Doctors everywhere ignore such feel-good bans; they have to watch the patients die.)

So a deeper reason for the Orbiter loss lies with the terror of the N-word. Science fiction is hardly blameless here. For decades sf movies featured giant ants and assorted horrifying, quite impossible creatures as the direct outcome of nuclear testing. Even print sf fastened on nuclear matters for scary plots, and not just nuke-war dramas. We writers should mull over the impact of our choices.

Still, the total of all those miscalibrated thrusts amounted to about a fifty-mile (eighty-kilometer) error in the Orbiter's arrival altitude. The craft was never supposed to enter the Martian atmosphere. Instead, it was to swing around the planet, fire its rocket engine for fifteen minutes, and settle into an orbit just above the thin carbon dioxide that accounts for a surface pressure of less than a hundredth ours. A few deft skims at this altitude would make the orbit circular, as is suitable for what would be the first true weather satellite around another world.

But as the craft approached, the flight team kept getting the wrong numbers for its position. Unease spread.

The team managers decided to trust the earlier navigation, telling others to prove the probe was not on the right path. This is exactly the opposite of standard practice, which demands that safety be demonstrated, not assumed.

A day before encounter, the Doppler shifts coming from the craft's radio signal were quite far off, suggesting that it was deeper into the Martian gravity well than

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it should have been. Still, management stuck with their cross-your-fingers philosophy. Several members of the team later said that they were sure the mission was doomed before the craft began its maneuver.

Simulations now show that probably the Orbiter slammed into the atmosphere at high speed, heating up and tumbling, until about one minute into this gyre, the hydrazine fuel on board reached ignition temperature. "There was enough on board to level a city block," an engineer said. The Orbiter simply exploded into coin-sized fragments, to rain down redly into the chilly Martian night.

This experience was sobering enough. Then came December 3, 1999, and the Polar Lander's utter stillness on the communication channels.

Why silence? Because to save weight and money, the telemetry which usually rides on the descent stage was omitted. After all, on previous missions, the signal had simply told the Jet Propulsion Lab that all was going well.

This landing was to feature a new type of descent mechanism, a complicated array of nozzles, so prudence would dictate telemetry. But no — the *cheaper* part of faster-better-cheaper won out. So in the twelve minutes between breaking contact with Earth and its programmed touchdown, the Lander was supposed to be silently doing its job.

The task was tough. It had to pull away from the structure that housed it for the nine-month journey. After a fiery entry, it had to deploy a parachute, drop its heat shield, radar-lock on the surface, drop the 'chute, then pick a landing spot and settle in.

Which part failed? We don't know.

Maybe none. In late January a persistent astronomer at Stanford University thought he got a weak signal from that antenna — a feat of detection. The antenna was never intended to do more than send housekeeping data about batteries and the solar panels (them again) up to the Orbiter, which was supposed to be flying above.

To pick that signal up on Earth would be marvelous, for it would tell us whether the descent mechanisms worked. Even if they did, there was plenty of danger waiting in the cold wastes of the south pole. Geologists suspect that the crust there may be crunchy and unable to bear much weight, because carbon dioxide freezes out every year and then sublimes away when summer

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comes to Mars, riddling the soil.

Then, too, the unlucky craft may have finally done what the engineers feared — landed on a big rock, ledge or pothole, tumbled, and sprawled so that no antenna could point at the Earth.

But in searches by several radio astronomy groups in February 2000, that signal did not turn up again. Probably we'll never know more about the Lander's fate. It would be an incredibly dim signal from a small antenna on the Lander, and though some will still try, no one is now optimistic.

I was working at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory the day this detection story first broke. I was helping on a completely different sort of experiment, but I have worked in radio astronomy for decades. I was asked to attend a meeting of the Deep Space Network which discussed the possible detection. Guarded elation was a heady sensation, after so much bad news. Engineers are human. They know the odds, but they, too, have a certain faith in technology.

However, no signals ever came from the two small torpedoes the Lander pitched out at high altitude. They were to slam into the Martian soil at several hundred miles-per-hour speeds, bore in, and report back with slender antennas what fluids they found, mostly looking for water and carbon dioxide ices.

When they, too, never phoned home, the engineers hauled out all the failure scenarios and frowned. Maybe the torpedoes bored too deep to call back to us. Maybe they hit solid rock, shattering. Maybe the whole package failed to separate from the larger Lander assembly....

Silence is the worst result you can get from deep space.

This mix of various human errors and unknowns can instruct us.

Flexibility is crucial. So is a habit of mind difficult to cultivate in management structures — always checking your expectations, reminding yourself that however smart and well-educated you may be, you can be wrong. We are awfully good at fooling ourselves.

Comparison with the *Challenger* disaster is instructive here. In the Orbiter case, managers clung to their models when experience said otherwise. Some elements of the whole mission were needlessly complex — especially the navigation program, a motley assembly with updated patchwork changes adorning it at every turn. And staff were told to get in line with the program: "take off your engineer hat and put on your management hat."

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People and their chimpanzee hierarchies will always get in the way of sound technical decisions. Politics trumps physics, usually.

But Nature bats last, to mix metaphors. We can fool ourselves, but not Her.

Then too, the difficulties are not entirely those set by nature. Fear of the N-word has made missions tougher, while not protecting any of us from a real threat. Not that this is easy for the public to see, when even physicists, eager for the spotlight, vastly overplay the risks. But the public still bears some responsibility, for living like Chicken Littles.

Finally, the most important facet of technology is that it must fail, eventually. Nothing is 100 percent safe. Sitting in your living room, reading this, you could be engulfed by fire, or even drilled by a meteorite, at any moment.

Exploring the solar system is much riskier than that. We have to expect failure and be undaunted by it.

Even better, learn from it — for next time.

Comments welcome at gbenford@uci.edu.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH'S COVER story comes to us from R. Garcia y Robertson, who last inspired the cover of our May issue. But this new one is very different from the sf adventure story he gave us recently. "The Iron Wood" introduces us to a medieval fantasy world called Markovy that's sure to capture your imagination.

Also scheduled for August is the *F&SF* debut of an award-winning novelist by the name of Tananarive Due. Ms. Due's horror novels have won great acclaim, but we're happy to report that "Patient Zero" shows her to be adept at science fiction as well.

Jack Cady, Albert Cowdrey, and Sheila Finch will also be providing good reading soon. And while it seems that last year's huge anniversary celebration scarcely came out yesterday, our next big anniversary issue is due soon, bringing with it new stories from James Morrow, Carolyn Ives Gilman, Ray Bradbury, and Alexander C. Irvine, to name but four. We're also planning to bring you some special issues shortly, so make sure your subscription's current if you want to be sure to read all these goodies.

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Robert Reed's ninth novel, Marrow, *should be in the stores by the time you read this issue. His new story for us re-examines the age-old theme of lycanthropy from an interesting perspective. It doesn't have anything to do with this story, but Bob also notes that he has a Siberian husky he can barely handle.*

Hybrid

By Robert Reed

I'm interested in owning one or more hybrids. What's my first step?

WELKS READS VIRTUALLY everything available on the subject. He starts with the popular how-to guides, including Collins's seminal *Possessing the Wild,* then moves to the uneven, self-published works like *Misunderstood* and *Souls Better Than Our Own.* A national advocacy group offers him the names and phone numbers of a dozen members within a hundred-mile radius. Ten agree to speak with him. Three of them agree to let Welks see their facilities. Two of them are an older couple happy to show off their hybrids to the curious man, their pride obvious and their love heartfelt. "Like no other pet or friend," says the wife. "They're our children," her husband declares, nonchalantly scratching the tip of his nose with the remnants of his right hand. When Welks inquires about the hand, the man makes the vague admission, "Mistakes get made." Then he conspicuously says nothing else about the matter.

The other tour is quick and unsettling. A tall and handsome woman

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perhaps five years older than Welks silently leads him to her enclosure. Its double gates hang open. The interior is choked with weeds. At the center is a small, durable cottage that has been obviously abandoned. Because it seems like a reasonable question, Welks asks, "Why?" The single word causes the poor woman to glance at the ground, some buried pain beginning to surface. She wears no ring. Was a child involved? Or a lost husband? Welks can't recall any local tragedies, and he's certain that he would remember. Every incident always get too much play on the news. But whatever happened here, he won't hear about it from this woman. She hugs herself and shakes her head, then suddenly looks up, not quite staring at Welks, telling him flat-out:

"My only advice is that you decide how you're going to put your animal down. If it comes to that. You need to ask yourself, 'When will I do it, and how will I do it?' Then you make preparations. Keep more than one option. Are you listening, Mr. Welks?"

"Always," he says.

"More than one option," she repeats. Then she leans forward, and in a whisper, she adds, "Keep your plans secret. From you-know-who. You-know-who."

What goes into a hybrid-worthy enclosure?

Welks lives ten miles outside the city limits. His large, comfortable home stands hidden inside acres of tangled woods and overgrown pasture. Eight different contractors show enough interest to drive out and meet with him. But most local firms don't have experience with this kind of project. Each makes the point of mentioning his liability insurance. "Why court disaster?" is the general tone.

Welks considers doing the job himself. Many people do just that. But he isn't a natural handyman, and his resources are considerable, since his parents left him with a fat inheritance. The answer, he decides, is to hire someone from out-of-state. Alaska and Montana offer the widest selection. Eventually he signs with a small firm based in Helena. Its young owners are smiling, gregarious twin brothers who happen to own their own hybrids. When they first meet Welks, they make a point of flipping open their wallets, showing off photographs of their best friends. That's exactly how they refer to their pets. "They're my best buddies in the

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world," says one brother, then the other. Smiling children and pretty wives go unmentioned, each of the brothers talking at length about the creatures nestled in the adjoining pockets, each trying to tell the most endearing stories and make the most impressive boasts.

The enclosure requires several weeks of good weather and a platoon of workers. Three acres are partly cleared, particularly near the future fence. A prefabricated cottage is assembled on site, water and power supplied through buried lines. Security cameras are set in high places, and armored. The fence itself is woven steel set on a deep concrete collar. Both fence and collar wear rugged sensors that will detect any breaks. The fence seems ridiculously tall, and it 's crowned not only with razor-wire but also a protruding wire that will be charged with electricity. A back-up generator is mandatory. Local codes and common sense demand every reasonable precaution. And the cottage has some embellishments that, while not dictated by law, are recommended by most texts as well as the Helena twins.

When the work is nearly done, the brothers start asking:

"When are you getting yours?"

Welks shrugs, mentioning that there are very few licensed in-state suppliers. "I'm on everyone's waiting list," he mentions. Then he gestures at the empty cottage, saying, "Next year, hopefully. Probably."

The twins exhange little looks.

"The thing is," says the left twin. "We've got some babies for sale. In fact, that little girl I showed you had a litter of three a year ago last January."

The infants are nearly old enough to leave their mother, Welks realizes.

"Christ knows," says the twin, "we've got plenty of people interested in them. But you're never sure about some folks, much less their facilities. And we know you. We know you, and we know you've got the best enclosure around...."

"Three puppies?"

"One's spoken for," says his brother.

"But I've got a boy and girl waiting for homes," says the first twin. "You can have either after New Years. At a reasonable price."

"How reasonable?"

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The amount is substantial, and bearable.

Smelling success, the first twin asks, "What's your preference, sir? A boy or girl?"

"The girl," he blurts. Females are usually smaller, and they tend to be more tractable. At least that's what the literature promises.

But Welks' enthusiasm triggers an odd reaction. The brothers laugh and give each other little winks. Then the second brother pats their client on the shoulder, in an overly fond way, and something about his broad grin and the clucking of his tongue leave Welks feeling cold and uneasy, and a little sick to his stomach.

Where did hybrids originally come from?

There's no definite answer. Fossils are scarce, and written accounts are nonexistent. But most evolutionary biologists believe that the species, more likely than not, is an extremely rare example of sweeping transgenic hybridization.

In plants, such events are relatively common.

Different species of plants can cross, producing viable seed. A new species arises in one generation. And because flowering plants are often self-pollinating, a lone specimen can survive, and if it finds an environment to its liking, it can quickly prosper.

But mammals aren't equally blessed. The elaborate blending of wolf and human traits is unique, and precious, and it leaves behind a stubborn tangle of mysteries. The best guess is that four or five thousand years ago, probably somewhere in southeastern Europe, infectious bacteria mistakenly absorbed large pieces of a wolf's genome. The bacteria infected a human woman, and despite long odds, the foreign genes were implanted inside her viable eggs. At least two hybridized children were born. There had to be a brother and a sister, each holding a different stew of confused genes. And someone — human or wolf — had to care for the odd children, and love them, until they were old enough to love one another.

Where do I find pet-quality hybrids?

The enclosure is finished in mid-September. Despite misgivings, Welks signs a promissory note to purchase the young bitch on her second birthday. The brothers resist temptation: No more sly winks, no fond pats

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on the back. Perhaps they sense that they've overstayed their welcome. Hopefully they realize that their client isn't the sort of pervert they took him to be.

At first, thinking about the ways in which his life is about to change, Welks feels a delicious, almost giddy excitement.

But then it's early November, the skies have turned to steel, and his excitement fades into frustration and impatience, and every flavor of doubt.

He isn't ready for this huge responsibility.

Obviously.

The tiniest mistake can lead to disaster. A hand might be lost, for instance. Or worse, his hybrid might escape confinement and hurt an innocent person, and of course she would have to be destroyed immediately.

And it would be his fault. His.

That's exactly what Welks is thinking one morning as he eats breakfast in his kitchen. Between eggs and his second cup of coffee, he happens to glance out the glass door, noticing something moving down by the newly built enclosure. An animal, he realizes. A mutt dog, he tells himself. But then the dog rises up on its long hind legs, standing against the outer gate, a humanness invading its hairy black body.

In the dim gray of the autumn dawn, the hybrid looks tiny.

Looks sad.

Welks thinks of his security cameras. One of them is in the perfect position, and he watches on the kitchen television, staring at the narrow black face and the bright blue-white eyes. Forefeet more like stubby hands than animal paws hold onto the gate. A tight steel bracelet clings to the right wrist. The remnants of handcuffs, maybe. An expression reminiscent of a smile forms on the long mouth, and something that might be a word spills across the candy-colored tongue and between the curling white canines.

"Hello?" she might be calling out.

Most hybrids can speak, in some limited fashion. And years of study and careful observation tell him that she is most definitely a she.

"Hello?" she repeats.

The poor creature is praying that some brother or sister of hers lives inside the enclosure. She's a runaway, and lonely. Obviously. Pity washes

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over Welks, and he takes a deep breath, stands and opens the sliding door, stepping out onto the porch, trying his best not to make any sound.

The hybrid never looks back at him.

One moment, she's standing at the gate, calling to phantoms. And then she's suddenly down on all fours, streaking toward the nearest woods, desperate to make herself into the smallest target imaginable.

How did hybrids acquire their sorry reputation?

Most people look at them one of two ways: Hybrids are odd wolves that can stand on their hind legs, or they are sad human beings with severely deformed faces and bodies and decidedly simple minds.

Both images are a little true, and inadequate.

According to biologists, what's important is that they are neither species, and from the moment the first ones were born, hybrids have been a poor substitute for wolves and for men. Yes, they are strong. And by human standards, fast. But they don't run as efficiently as wolves, nor do they have the same bone-shearing jaw strength or the keen sense of smell. And despite a brain far larger than any canine's, the wisest hybrid is little better than a six-year-old human equipped with stubby fingers and difficult thumbs. Tools have to be simple and sturdy to be of any use. The most advanced and prosperous wild population — several thousand "wolffolk" who used to live in the high Carpathians — made their own stone implements when they couldn't steal knives and pikes from their human neighbors.

History is thick with conflict between humans and their odd offspring. The truth is that without either parent's full talents, the hybrids had little choice but to live in humankind's shadow, stealing their livestock and raiding their food caches to stave off famine. Hungry peasants armed with spears could do little. But muskets and muzzle-loading rifles changed that ancient balance. The wild populations began to retreat, and shrink, and by the mid-1800s, it looked as if the hybrids would follow the dodo into extinction.

But Europe's new nation-states were on the rise, each with a standing army demanding bodies, and a restless citizenry that had to be kept under heel.

The last wild hybrids were snared and caged, and their puppies were

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taken to be raised by human handlers. Properly conditioned, those half-tame hybrids were strong and fearless soldiers, and horribly cruel, and the best of them were utterly loyal to their foster parents. Tsarist Russia strangled more than one rebellion with their hybrid brigades. The Communists condemned the practice, then used the animals as guards throughout the Gulag. During both World Wars, Germany earned worldwide condemnation for arming thousands of hybrids with specially-designed guns and gas bombs, then throwing them against enemy lines. While the Americans preferred small, cohesive packs — using them against the Japanese, and later, in secret operations, against the Viet Cong.

Public outcries helped end that horror, and the changing nature of war did the rest.

The most violent hybrids were euthanized, while the docile ones have been bred by a growing, increasingly sophisticated array of hobbyists and business people.

Today, *hybrid* is the only polite, accepted name for the species.

"Wolffolk" and "werewolves" and other derogatory labels have been left in the ugly, unconscionable past.

Hybrids are an honor to own, and a grave responsibility.

Possessing even one of the wondrous creatures is an endless challenge that appeals to remarkable people with resources and commitment and ample reserves of understanding and patience.

What do I feed my hybrid?

After consulting his library, Welks thaws a package of chicken hindquarters and hangs the raw meat from a low branch, then retreats to his house and watches, off and on, until the sun sets.

During the night, the chicken parts are yanked down and carried away.

He repeats the gesture that next morning, imagining the hybrid watching him as he carefully adjusts the greasy string. Then he washes his hands and drives into the city. His favorite pet store won't sell hybrids because of legal concerns, but they carry a full line of hybrid foods and harnesses and toys. A few clerks actually seemed well-versed in the subject. Welks doesn't mention what he has seen, but he has to ask, "Have any of the local hybrids turned up missing?"

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The clerk is a thin young woman who smells of cigarettes. With a mixture of horror and amusement, she says, "God, I hope not!"

Then she asks, "Why? Did you see one running loose?"

"No, no. No." He lifts a fifty-pound sack of hybrid chow, easing it into the cart. "I just wondered if you'd heard anything."

"If you lose yours," she reminds him, "you've got to report it to the sheriff and Animal Control. Immediately!"

"I don't even own one."

She gives the sack a suspicious glance.

"I'm just getting ready," he explains. "For when I do."

The woman concentrates, then shakes her head. "I haven't heard anything about any missing hybrids. No."

"Good," says Welks.

But that's not really what he wants to ask.

"Who wouldn't report an escape?" he presses. "Any guesses?"

She shrugs, then states the obvious.

"Someone who has them illegally, I suppose. Without the proper enclosures, or the proper papers."

Welks thinks of the handcuff on the poor animal's wrist.

He nods and sighs, and says nothing.

"Anything else?" the clerk inquires.

At the end of the aisle is a cardboard display. Special VHS tapes are meant for a special audience. Welks takes one of each, then pays with cash.

"So when do you get yours?" the woman asks, her expression more than curious.

"Soon," Welks admits. "Soon."

Then he drives home to find the chicken missing again. Fresh paw prints mark the soft dust. Adrenalin makes his heart race. Carefully, slowly, he looks around the yard and the empty enclosure. Then he fills a steel dish with the fat-rich chow — each nugget shaped like a mouse or a mole — and he leaves it just inside the open gates before finally slipping into his empty house.

How do I train my hybrid?

Experts agree; there's no way to "train" the species. The only worthy

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goal is to win their trust and develop a common language of words and gestures that both of you can understand, without too much confusion.

The enclosure's little cottage has a single room.

Its floor is soft clean earth where the resident can dig as deeply as she wants. Some hybrids sleep underground, in wolf-like burrows. Others make their beds aboveground, using newspapers and linen and dried leaves. Boredom is a significant problem, particularly for hybrids kept alone. That's why a television is bolted into one of the walls. A special model, it has two large screens, outside as well as inside. Both the television and attached VCR are heavily padded and simple to use. As night falls, Welks slips in one of the new tapes, then turns up the volume and retreats, leaving the gates open behind him. The tape is three hours of images that any hybrid will find irresistable — bounding deer and mountain vistas and cold rivers sliding over towering granite cliffs.

The tape runs to the end, then rewinds and starts again.

Welks can hear the running water from his bedroom. Soothed, he falls into a dreamless dark sleep. Then he wakes in the pre-dawn gloom, realizing in slow steps that he can't hear the television any longer. Excited, he dresses in his bright orange shock suit — a reasonable precaution at this stage — and hurries across the yard, closing and locking both of the gates behind him.

The dish of hard chow has been kicked aside, uneaten.

Welks walks with authority toward the cottage. He belongs here. His pace and posture signal that simple, affirmative message. He belongs here, and he's in total control. A person can't keep hybrids unless he can eventually become the undisputed alpha male, and this is the best way to begin that long process.

With his shock suit fully charged, he steps into the cottage.

The television is playing, but the volume has been turned down, and a different tape has been inserted.

Not one of his tapes, Welks realizes.

He doesn't see deer or waterfalls, but instead the familiar blackish muzzle and cold blue eyes. The hybrid stares at the camera. At Welks. A man's voice, thick and excited, says, "Get her!" Says, "Go on now, get her!"

The camera pans back.

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The hybrid is standing upright, some kind of heavy manacle around one ankle. She bends forward, waiting. A dog appears — some kind of Doberman-mix — sprinting across the concrete floor of a large garage. At the last instant, it leaps at the hybrid, and she neatly swats the dog on the head, with both fists, driving it back down to the floor.

Perhaps a dozen men are cheering. Hollering. Applauding.

"Go!" the first voice screams. "Don't you stop now!"

The dog leaps again, and this time the hybrid pins it against the steel wall, and with her mouth, she neatly and efficiently eviscerates the helpless animal, leaving it dead and scattered at her feet.

The camera pulls in close now.

Through the spattered gore, blue eyes stare at Welks.

Then the cheers fall away, and the man holding the camera says, "Good girl," with pride and affection in his voice. "Good, good, good."

How can I catch my hybrid, if she happens to get free?

For her own sake, Welks needs to catch her inside the enclosure. And he needs an irresistible bait. He decides on the thick, musty scent of a male hybrid. In mid-morning, when she's most probably asleep, he slips into the cottage and opens a stoppered bottle, then closes the door and waits. Loneliness can be a greater motivation than food, he reasons. By late afternoon, his shock suit feels warm and heavy, and the last of his candy bars are gone. But he continues waiting, his own loneliness helping him ignore his hunger.

Dusk turns to night, coaxing the hybrid out of the woods.

Crouching low, peering through a small nightscope, Welks spies her athletic figure gently trotting along the tall steel fence. Now and again, her muzzle lifts, testing the chilling air. How can she resist? Pausing before the gates, she rears her head back and moans softly. Welks recognizes the longing in her voice and her body. He aches for her. But this is for her own good, he reminds himself, turning on a boombox, and the taped howl of an anguished male carries up through the darkness.

Instantly, she starts to run.

With a half-leap, she passes through the gates, charging across the open ground, answering the fake howl with her own miserable one.

Welks fingers a remote control.

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And waits.

Suddenly, without warning, she turns and runs back up the hill.

It takes a moment for Welks to accept what he's seeing. He feels startled. Baffled. And a little angry. Before he can think it through, his finger has pressed the red button, and he has given himself away, both of the tall gates pulling shut with a high-pitched whine.

She's down on all fours, driving hard with her long hind legs, the stubby half-tail kept flat and her entire body fighting to remain as aerodynamic as possible.

Welks believes that she can't reach the gates in time.

But she does. Easily.

He jerks open the cottage door, then stumbles outside as the gates lock automatically. His kitchen lights have been left on — better to make it look as if he's inside the house — and against their warm glow, he sees the silhouette of the hybrid standing on the wrong side of things. A wild fear builds with every step. Not an emotional person by nature, he starts to sob and curse under his gasping breath...and despite the fact that he's absolutely safe inside this elaborate enclosure...

But what is she doing?

The question trickles into his consciousness, accompanied by a remarkable sense of helplessness.

The hybrid isn't just standing outside the gate. No, her clumsy hands are manipulating something. Is it a rope? No, he hears the musical clink of steel links. She has a length of heavy chain, and she's wrapping it through the gate and fence and back again, then she joins the ends with a second something.

A scrap piece of metal, apparently.

It takes all of her strength to bend it. But she finishes the job before Welks finally chugs his way up to her. Gasping, dripping inside the heavy shock suit, he must look weak and ridiculous. As far from the alpha male as possible. But he's lost all of his dignity and his composure, screaming at her, telling her, "You aren't. Smart enough! You aren't!"

But obviously, she is.

He presses the release code into the control, and the both gates unlock and begin to open. But the outer gate is held shut by the chain, and the bent piece of steel, tied into the simplest knot, resists the motor's pressure.

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The hybrid stands back from the gate, watching him.

Welks has read volumes about the body language of hybrids, and he's studied them on tapes and in the zoo. What her body says is, "I am in control." It tells him, "I've beaten you, silly man." He doesn't need any study to tell him that much. Then she turns without the smallest concern, showing her strong back to him, the stubby tail flicking at the sky as she calmly strolls away.

Again, Welks screams.

No words this time. Just rage, pure and animal. And utterly useless.

Suppose she has the advantage. What should I do then?

He has options.

The easiest trick would be triggering the main alarm. He can do it with his remote control or his own hand. But that would bring the authorities, which isn't what he wants. People would see her tracks. They would know about her. And on top of everything, it would be a terrible embarrassment — a public catastrophe to be avoided at all cost.

Reaching through the armored straps, he struggles to unfasten the chain. Somehow. And for the first two or three hours, Welks enjoys enough success to keep working at the problem. With sticks and his boot laces, he finally manages to grab hold of the twisted rebar, and with his fingers numb and bleeding, it seems as if he's jerked and prodded the old metal enough that he can see a gap forming.

Then she appears again, coming out of the woods, dragging the long limp carcass of a young deer by its antlers.

She doesn't threaten him, or even seem to notice what he's doing. Instead, she drops her prize and calmly steps up to the back of his house, picking up a dead geranium and its clay pot, throwing both of them through the sliding glass door.

He drops the chain, and he watches.

The animal is standing inside his kitchen. In the deliberative fashion of a child, she opens drawers until she finds something of interest. Then she steps outside again, jumping slightly when the heat pump kicks on, the chilled outside air flooding into the warm and bright air inside.

He says, "Jesus."

She holds a carving knife in both hands. She needs two hands to

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manipulate it, but she obviously has done this kind of work before. With a little grunt, she cuts through the skin, slicing to the white bone. Then she slices again, following the grain of the muscle, carving off a strip of fur and venison as long as her forearm. Then she drops the knife and wraps the prize into a ball, and looking at Welks for the first time, she flings it over the razor wire.

In a sloppy little voice, she says something.

"Eat," it sounds like. Although he can't be sure.

He glances at the dirty venison, then looks back at her. And quietly, with awe and anger, he tells her, "No."

He promises her, "I'm not that hungry."

She springs toward the gate.

And dropping the knife, she stops just short of it.

Gazing through the straps, she says nothing. She doesn't even watch him, staring instead at a point somewhere behind his wide eyes.

In a soft voice, Welks admits, "I saw you. I saw you kill that dog."

Nothing.

"They were bad men," he says. "You had to do it. You didn't have a choice."

She repeats one of his words.

"Koice," it sounds like.

Welks tries to smile, explaining, "Those men made you do it. They made you. If you hadn't killed the dog, it would have killed you. I understand. You had no choice."

Hybrids and human language has always been a subject of much debate. The best guess is that some hybrids understand abstractions, and a few of them, having the most human-like mouths, can carry on a passable if somewhat simple conversation.

"You had no choice," he repeats.

She shakes her head, her expression suddenly angry.

"Koice," she says. Then, "Koice always." And she lifts both of her hands, two stubby thumbs pointing at the sky.

He watches, spellbound.

"Koice. I live."

One thumb rises higher.

"Koice. I die."

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The other thumb follows it up.

"I koice live," she tells him. And dropping the death thumb, she smiles at Welks in a faintly human fashion, and up on her two hind legs, she calmly trots back into the woods.

How smart can she be?

Welks is exhausted, and frustrated, and in ways he couldn't have imagined, enthralled. For lack of anything better, he retreats into the cottage and lies down on the soft earth floor, warm enough inside his shock suit to eventually drift off to sleep. Then it's just after seven in the morning, and he wakes abruptly, struggling to his feet and looking up at the house, discovering that both gates are standing open again.

Besides her tracks and the dead deer, there's no trace of the hybrid. Welks finds the kitchen knife where she dropped it, and he searches every room in the house, just to be certain that he's alone. Then he tapes heavy plastic over the shattered door and calls a glass shop that will do home repairs, and even though he's practically shaking from hunger, he drags the stiff deer carcass back into the woods, uses a heavy broom to obscure her tracks, and with the gates open, he strings bike chains through them and fastens them with padlocks, making it virtually impossible to catch anyone inside the enclosure.

The hybrid comes again after dark.

The ground floor lights are out. Welks sits at the breakfast table, waiting. A shadow appears on the back porch, abruptly and without sound, weightless and full of an eerie grace. She hesitates in front of the repaired door, then using both hands, picks up the same potted geranium.

Quietly, with a tight nervous voice, Welks says, "The door's not locked. Go on. Pull it open."

Confused, she stares at the new glass and latch.

He forces himself to stand, showing her first that his hands are empty, then pulling the door open while she watches.

"See?" he asks.

Then he shuts the door again and steps back.

"You do it," he tells her.

She considers the flower pot, then sets it down. And with both hands, she opens the door and steps into the darkened kitchen.

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"Now shut it again," he tells her.

She stands an inch or two more than five feet high, rocking slowly back and forth, one little foot and then the other absorbing her weight. Her face is obscured by darkness. But hybrids have excellent night vision, Welks knows. She can see his eyes and mouth, using them to read his mood.

"If you come into my house," he tells her, "shut the door behind you."

Nothing happens.

"Please," he adds.

She turns her back to him and pulls the door shut.

Welks returns to the table, sits and says, "If you don't like hybrid chow, I can feed you something else. What do you want?"

She takes a step, then pauses.

Waits.

"You seem to like chicken," he mentions. "Do you want chicken?"

"Oo," she says.

No?

She sets her arm on the tabletop. The broken handcuff is too tight for her wrist. Her hand has to be in pain, or at the very least, numbed. And the area around the cuff looks tender to the touch and badly swollen.

"This won't be easy," he warns. "I'll have to use a saw. A very loud machine. And the blade's going to make you bleed. Do you understand me?"

"Utt!" she urges him.

"I don't want to hurt you," he tells her.

"Utt!"

He rises to his feet, compassion and fear coming in alternating waves.

She stares at his face.

Once more, he asks, "Do you understand me?"

"Eep oor kosed. Kosed!" And to prove what she knows, she opens the door and shuts it again, chanting, "Kosed, kosed, kosed...."

How can I earn her trust?

If she has a name, she doesn't choose to share it.

Welks removes the cuff and bandages the wounds. Then he takes her on a tour of his house, showing her every room, every closet, letting her

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sniff door handles and the dusty corners. When she finally selects her bed, he says nothing. They're on the third floor, in the retrofitted attic where he keeps a big-screen television. She climbs onto the plush sofa and stares at him until she's certain that he won't argue with her. Then she calmly and efficiently shreds the middle cushion with her teeth, removing mouthfuls of pale foam and piling them against the armrest, then covering the mess with a wool blanket from a downstairs closet, tucking in the edges before she lies down on top of the mess.

More than anything, what surprises Welks is how quickly he accepts this destruction. His favorite sofa is destroyed, and it couldn't matter less.

Satisfied, she leaps up again, running downstairs and out the kitchen door.

She brings her possessions inside plastic grocery sacks. There are favorite cow bones and a talisman made from rawhide and a human doll that has been partially eviscerated. Plus there's a long piece of firewood around which shaggy black upholstery has been tied, two blue tacks stuck into the upholstery, creating eyes. It's a doll, Welks realizes. A hybrid doll. And she made it with her own hands.

An intoxicating new order quickly replaces the old.

Welks's life isn't what the books promised, and it is like nothing that he has ever tried to imagine.

The hybrid always slips out of the house after midnight, then creeps back in before dawn. When she isn't asleep, she shadows Welks. Without actually watching him, she seems to know everything that he's doing or is about to do. Every meal must be shared. Eggs and meat and cheese have to be divided into two portions. But she never begs. Not in any overt, demeaning way, she won't. She just perches on the chair across from him, and stares, and after a while the very stupid human finally realizes what she wants.

She learns to use the toilet when she's indoors, though she never remembers to actually flush it.

A little more every day, Welks better understands her narrow voice.

They grow halfway adept at telling each other stories about their days and nights. If Welks drives into the city, he has to describe the trip. And she tells him about the sights and smells in the woods, and how many deer she chased for fun, and how many stupid rabbits were too slow to escape her.

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Just once, she brings home a big farm cat.

Welks explains that he doesn't approve. And burying the body in the cold ground, he adds, "Someone might miss this animal. Someone might come looking for it."

Cats are dirty, she declares in her own defense. "Girty, inky, girty kat!"

But she doesn't bring home her trophies anymore.

A late November snow forces her to stay inside. Both make the decision, and it's a smart one. Hybrid tracks are obvious, looking like a clawed human running up on her toes. One person noticing one careless footprint could bring disaster.

She quickly gets bored doing nothing but sleeping and eating and watching television.

On television, she prefers the various cartoon networks. The smart-talking bunny makes her laugh. And whenever the coyote pursues the road runner, she screams, "Fass, fass!" and races around the sofa, arms reaching for imaginary birds. And when the inevitable failure occurs, she cries, "Dupid dog!" and shakes her fist at the exploding screen.

Welks has never laughed so hard.

He can't remember any moment when he felt half as happy as he does now.

Then it's mid-December, early in the morning, and a man suddenly appears in the backyard. A stocky fellow, he walks through the snow, heading toward the enclosure. The kitchen blinds are wide open. Welks glances at her, and she looks out, then silently jumps off the chair and hurries upstairs. Then he opens the sliding door, shouting out at the stranger, "Can I help you?"

The stranger stops, slowly turns and looks up at Welks.

For a long moment, neither man speaks.

Then Welks repeats his question, and the stranger makes a decision. He marches up to the house to say, "Hello, sir," with a forced friendliness. "I'm here from Animal Control." And he flashes his ID.

Welks feels as if he's falling.

Like the coyote plunging off a tall butte, he drops and drops.

But his voice is dry and calm when he asks, "What do you want here?"

"You aren't using your pen there, are you?"

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"Does it look like I am?" Then Welks takes a breath and forces himself to sound helpful. "No," he admits, "I'm not using the enclosure. Yet."

The man has a simple, determined face. He regards Welks with suspicion, then asks, "Have you seen any hybrids running loose?"

Something about the voice is familiar.

Is wrong.

Welks says, "No," and then remembers where he's heard the voice before. It was on the videotape that she brought with her. It was the voice telling her, "Good girl," after the dog had been killed.

Again, louder this time, Welks says, "No."

Something in his voice causes the man to squint and step closer. And forcing a smile, he says, "If you have seen any hybrids, you should tell me."

"I haven't," he manages.

"You're sure?"

Welks wants to look at the ID again. Because it has to be a forgery, and that isn't the only crime this man has committed.

But most of all, he wants this man to go away.

So he manages a little breath, then says, "If I see a hybrid, I'll shoot it first. Then I'll call you. What did you say your name was?"

The stranger growls, "Smith."

And with that, he turns and marches back around the house and up the driveway to where his pickup truck waits for him, watched all the way by a set of blue eyes peering through the little attic windows.

How can I trust myself?

It's night again, and she creeps downstairs.

Welks is awake, thinking about the day. About his life, and everything else. He hears her light footfalls moving on the stairs, and he realizes that she's trying to be silent about whatever she's doing, which isn't like her.

Somewhere downstairs, a door opens.

Closes.

Welks rises and pulls on trousers, then follows. What if she's gone? And what if she doesn't return again? Steeling himself against disaster, he

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steps into the kitchen and hesitates for a moment, then hears a sound. An odd sound, low and pained, that he follows into the living room, flipping on the main light as he rounds the corner.

She's down on his good Persian rug, on her knees, both hands thrust between her legs and her tail held high. The musky stink of a male hybrid makes the air close and heavy. The unstoppered bottle is set on the floor in front of her. Working both hands, she snorts and gives a low moan as she turns, looking up at him without the tiniest shame, turning just enough that he can see her four black nipples, fat and aroused, rising through her glossy black fur.

Welks backs away. Instantly.

Then he flips off the light and says, "Sorry," to both of them, and he returns to his room, closing his door and lying on top of the sheets, still wearing his trousers, wrestling with his urgent, incredible thoughts.

In the morning, before breakfast, he calls Montana.

He wakes up one of the twin brothers; he doesn't know which one, nor does he care. He explains that he doesn't want the female anymore, but is her brother still available? Then to circumvent tantrums or questions, Welks adds, "For your trouble, I'll pay you twice our agreed upon fee. In cash."

A stunned silence.

"I guess that'll be fine," the brother finally admits.

Welks can't decide what the hybrid makes of the conversation, if anything. He hangs up and returns her gaze. Then he cooks eggs for both of them, and she looks through the blinds now and again. But the stranger isn't going to return, it seems. After breakfast, she uses the downstairs toilet before trotting upstairs to nap, and Welks flushes the toilet and waits for the sound of the cartoon explosions filtering down through the house. Then he finds another old phone number and punches it in and hangs up before the first ring. Feeling foolish, he opens the blinds, looking out at the very expensive, utterly useless enclosure. Then he dials again, calling that handsome woman who never explained her tragedy. She seems to be the same as he, he tells himself: Alone in life, with an emptiness whose gates have been left open.

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Dale Bailey teaches in the English Department at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. His first book, American Nightmares *(reviewed in our pages two months ago), grew out of his doctoral dissertation. He says he found this story much more fun to write; we hope you'll agree that reading it is most enjoyable too.*

Inheritance

By Dale Bailey

HOW YOU HAVE ENDURED it all these years, I cannot say. Even now that he is dead, I can feel his presence in this house, this room. It rises in wide waves from the things I've arranged across this table. The diamond ring in its dusty jeweler's box. The black and white photograph of the woman, really just a girl. The close-written letter, yellow now with age.

I could touch these items if I wanted to. If I wanted to, I could lift the letter to my face, smell that musty resonance old paper gets, that gust of antiquity and gloom. And something else, something I must be imagining: a hint of dime-store perfume, the kind a girl might wear. Surely it cannot have survived so long.

But I won't touch these things again. Not until I burn them.

I'll try to be clear if I can.

You need to know that I've lied to you about some things. I am married, though I told you otherwise. And I'm not nearly as obscure as I

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have led you to believe. I *am* an artist of sorts — though I'm not a painter, not the kind of painter I wanted to be anyway, and that's partly why I came here. So if I lied when I told you I was an artist, I told the truth in my way. Also, in some respect I told the truth when I said I wasn't married. Because the truth is, when I said that, I had decided — or I was in the process of deciding — that I didn't want to be married. That's the other part of why I came here.

Well, that's all changed now. That's why I'm writing it all down. So I can understand. I'm going to put it all down as clearly as I can remember it.

I need to understand.

This house came to me as such events befall orphans in tales, without hope or expectation, in the hour of my greatest need.

I'm sorry if this sounds dramatic.

My parents — my adoptive parents — died eight years ago, when an interstate trucker strung out on speed dozed off behind the wheel. In the days after the accident, I had this recurring dream of the truck as they must have seen it in their last conscious moments: three tons of metal careening across the median strip at eighty-seven miles an hour. The dream filled me with intense, paralyzing fear: not of pain, but of the imminence of a disaster I could foresee but not prevent. The dream-wreck occurred with adrenalized leisure. Time ceased to flow at the normal rate. I could perceive everything, but I could act on nothing.

At this time I was twenty-five years old, newly married, just graduated from art school. Already I had learned something of the accommodations our dreams demand. Instead of selling my paintings in trendy Soho galleries as I had vaguely intended, I found employment doing movie posters and covers for cheap paperbacks. The work was enjoyable, often challenging, the money good — but I knew it wasn't art. In those days, I still told myself I would continue with "real" art, but in my heart I already knew this to be a lie. The death of my parents came as simply another of life's brutish surprises.

It did not make it easier that I had been adopted. I remember thinking that twice in my life I had lost all at once what most people lose piecemeal over the span of a lifetime. I had twice lost my family. Of the first time,

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the first family, I remember nothing. The second time I cannot forget.

I have tried not to think of these things. Until these recent events, it has been easier than you might think.

It's odd how things start. I'm thinking right now of an old nursery rhyme, the one that goes, "For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; / For want of the shoe, the horse was lost," and so on, all the way up to the loss of the kingdom — "All for want of a horseshoe nail." I remember I once heard a teacher cite this rhyme as an exercise in false logic. Now I'm not so sure.

I don't know where this begins. Maybe when that trucker smashed across the median strip and crushed my adoptive father's Honda like an empty soda can, or maybe further back, when my mother — my biological mother — gave me up for adoption, or maybe (still further back) when my father's cursed seed found purchase in my mother's womb. Or maybe that's just as ridiculous as it sounds. Maybe it begins with my first dawning suspicions of Cynthia back toward the end of the summer, or — even more recently — with the house, this fairytale inheritance, like something out of a third-rate novel.

Maybe it begins with the phone call.

AT THIS POINT — the point of the phone call — Cynthia and I have been married for seven years, one month, five days, a few hours. A week ago, this figure would not have entered my mind. Now I can think of nothing else.

I do not know the man on the phone, an old man by the sound of him, but he identifies himself as a lawyer. Simon Borden. In the space of a single moment all the oxygen rushes from the room. I grope for breath. I am thinking: Cynthia, oh, Cynthia.

Perhaps I say it aloud, for Borden says, "What? Cynthia?"

When I say nothing — what can I say? — he says, "I don't know any Cynthia, Mr. Nicholls. I'm calling in regards to an estate."

"An estate?"

"An inheritance," he says. "A house. Some property, too."

"There must be a mistake," I say. I am at my desk in the upstairs studio where I work: a bright skylit room with windows facing east and

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west and counters littered by tubes of paint and galleys and sketches. I turn to the window and gaze blindly at the Bay. I see that dream truck I have not seen in years, a leviathan smashing heedless as fate over the median strip.

"My parents died," I say. "There's no one else to leave me anything."

Borden shuffles papers. "Those would be your adoptive parents, correct?"

"That's right."

"Have you ever tried to find your real family, Mr. Nicholls?"

"My *real* family died eight years ago. If you mean my *biological* family, the answer is no. Why should I?"

"I'm calling on behalf of a biological uncle," Borden says. "His estate, rather. Lucius Kemp. It seems he hired an investigator to find you. He never contacted you?"

"No."

"Well, it appears he found you at any rate." He hesitates. "Your uncle...passed away a bit over a month ago. His house, his farm — he left all of it to you. Even his pick-up."

"Where did you say you were calling from?"

"West Virginia."

"And the farm?"

"West Virginia."

So I have an uncle. A week ago this news might have sparked my interest. A week ago it might have moved me.

"Mr. Nicholls?"

"Send the papers to my lawyer," I say.

As I give him the address, the garage door starts up beneath me. Cynthia. I reach over and lock the door. I will tell her I am working.

None of them want me to go — not my lawyer, not my agent, not my wife.

We can have the house appraised, my lawyer tells me. We can put it on the market. You never need to go there.

You have a deadline, my agent says. You have a contract.

When I tell Cynthia, we are in the kitchen.

"Sell the house," she says from the sink. "What do we need with a

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house in West Virginia?" She cannot bear to look at me when she says it. She speaks with her face turned down and away, one quarter profile. I can see a delicate curve of cheek, a sliver of upturned nose, a fringe of eyelashes, fuzzed blonde with twilight. I notice she has used the pronoun "we."

On the stove, pots bubble and simmer. A loaf of fresh bread cools on a rack. Spicy smells drift in the air. Cynthia cooks to dispel anxiety. We've been eating well.

"I'm going down there," I say. "I need some time to think."

"You can't just run away from this," Cynthia says.

"You did," I say.

You did, Cynthia.

That's what I'm thinking during the long drive, my headlights probing the swarming dark. Hours on the highway, down and around D.C., I-66 to 81 South, then west on 64 into desolate and uncharted territory. The broad highway into West Virginia strikes me as anachronistic — a contemporary blight on these ancient hills. But for the highway and the occasional blaze of small towns hidden in the valleys, the terrain looks as it might have looked two hundred years ago. Unspoiled. Untouched.

Forbidding.

I exit into darkness. Not even a McDonald's or a gas station, just the gray thread of a twisting two-lane road. I am thinking: You did, Cynthia. You ran away.

It's all so banal I can hardly bear to recall it.

Cynthia in tears as I pack my car: a suitcase of warm clothes for autumn in the mountains, a beat-up box of oils and brushes I've hardly used since art school, a sketchbook, an easel, two or three clean, beckoning canvases. I've packed a few groceries, but I leave the thermos of coffee and the paper sack of sandwiches she's made me for the trip.

"Don't you have a deadline?" she says when she sees the canvases.

"Not anymore."

"What about your contract?"

"What about it?"

As I start the car, she leans in the window. "Please, David. Stay. We can work this out."

"I have to go."

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"Goddamnit, David, I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say to this.

She says, "You can't run away from this."

And now, as the early morning dark presses down and down, I am thinking, *You did, Cynthia. You ran away.* My headlights skate across the pavement, across signs and denuded trees that loom over the road like sentinel giants. Here and there, the forest draws back. Sleep-darkened houses crouch in the steep fields.

I am lost.

I stop in the middle of the deserted road and study the map by the dome light. I turn it two or three times to see if a new perspective might help. I study Borden's typewritten directions. I drive on.

Cynthia's face hovers before me, at the limit of my lights. It is her face as I saw it when I confronted her — glistening with tears, her beauty distorted by sorrow and regret.

"I'm sorry," she said then. She said, "How did you know?"

There must have been a thousand little things, an incremental perception, confirmed at last. Oh, she was careful. How did I know? I might have told her that she began to look through me instead of at me. That when we made love she wasn't there. That she had a glow about her I hadn't seen in years. I might have told her any of these things or all of them, but I didn't. I said nothing, for it didn't matter how I knew. It only mattered that I did.

"I love you," she said.

That's what I'm thinking of when I finally find a landmark I recognize from the directions: a gray wide-slatted barn in a declivity below the road, its tin roof painted with a weathered advertisement for Red Man Chewing Tobacco. Nothing else in sight, not even a house. I might be the first traveler to happen across the barn in a decade or more.

From there it's easy enough. The gas station/general store; two or three miles of scoliotic road, overhung with barren trees; the gate marked NO TRESPASSING. The car jolts over the rutted driveway. In the gray dawn light smudged over the horizon, a mix of evergreens and deciduous trees looms up. And then the trees fall away and the house emerges, a low, rambling stone house with a long front porch and wide, clean windows that throw back the morning light.

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I stop the car and get out. A bird calls somewhere.

I start down toward the house, and it feels like coming home.

How did you know? Cynthia had asked me.

How do you ever know?

EVERYTHING IS as I have requested: the key under the mat, the electricity and phone activated. According to my watch, it is six thirty A.M. I call Cynthia.

"I've been worried sick," she says.

"I got lost."

"David, I've been thinking. Maybe I could come — "

"Not yet," I say. "Not now."

I hang up and look around the house. Lucius Kemp. My uncle. There is a certain novelty in having family, in seeing here this visible evidence of his life — this house, this farm. Like discovering a new continent within yourself, a vast temperate zone you did not know existed, though perhaps at some level you have always known or sensed that it was there, ripe and undiscovered. For a moment, I can almost forget Cynthia in the simple pleasure of discovering this home I did not know I had.

"Who are you, Lucius Kemp?" I say, to hear the sound of my voice here. I shout aloud: "Who are you?"

Nothing. My voice rolls back to me from uninhabited rooms. Like shouting aloud in a graveyard, I think. And then I think: What nonsense. But I do not shout again.

The house is not large: a kitchen with a door into a cellar; a common room with a table, a sofa, a fireplace; two bedrooms and a bathroom off a hall. I fetch my bags from the car, two trips across the gravel drive, into the silent house, down the hall to the larger bedroom. On the second trip, I stop to study the photograph of a woman atop the bureau — a girl really, her clothes and hair the fashions of another age, her beauty too, a soft rounded voluptuousness women don't possess these days. I think of Cynthia, lean and tall and small-breasted, her body like an athlete's. And then — because I don't want to think of Cynthia — I put the photo down, this woman who must have been my aunt.

In the kitchen, I find a can of Maxwell House. I brew a pot and stand out on the porch to watch the morning creep golden down the ridges,

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across the naked trees. That bird has started up again, away over the hill beyond the barn. The air is chill with a hint of winter coming on. But it feels like home. It feels like home.

I leave my clothes in the suitcase, atop the bed in the spare bedroom. My uncle's clothes are in the closets and in the drawers and I'm not certain what to do with them. For now, I want to leave things as I find them. For a time, I want to be a ghost here. I want to make as little impression as I can on this house, these possessions. Now that I am here, curiosity has seized me. I want to search him out in the things he owns, the way an archaeologist might reconstruct a culture from an arrowhead and a shard of broken pottery. Who is this man? Who are you, Lucius Kemp?

At mid-morning, I set up the easel in the common room. I will work here, in the early light. I place the sketchbook atop the table, lean the canvases against one end of the sofa. But I'm not ready to paint. That will come.

In the meantime, I wander about the house, exhausted from the trip, but wired with caffeine and nervous energy. I think, and for the first time in a week I do not think of Cynthia.

By noon, it has all caught up with me: the trip, the stress of the break with Cynthia, the exhaustion of the drive. In the bedroom, I claw down the sheets. In the moment before sleep seizes me, I have a fleeting thought, an illumination.

Is this the bed he died in?

Once, twice, three times in as many days I speak with Cynthia. Three conversations fraught with strong emotion. I want to come down there, she says. I want to work this out.

But I have my wants, I have my desires.

"What about him?" I ask.

Do you still see him every day at work? Do you find time to sneak away at lunch, to rut like animals in cheap hotels? Do you?

"It's not like that. It never was."

"Then how is it?"

Is it love, then? And isn't that worse?

"Are you still seeing him?"

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"Of course not, David," she replies, but by the catch in her throat I know that she is lying.

I stop answering the phone. I listen to it ring and ring, another noise in this house of noises. I can hear them when I sleep and sometimes when I'm wakeful. The shrill wind desolate among the hills. The house settling around me. Voices. I hear voices, faint and faraway, like whispers from another room. I cannot make them out. Sometimes when I try to work I'll find that I have dropped my pencil and pushed my tablet away. I'll wake to myself, hands flat against the table, straining to understand. How long I've been like that I cannot say. The voices hasten into silence. The whole house gathers, listening.

I get up, push my things away, wander restlessly about the house and grounds. In three days, I've explored everything. The house, looking much as it looked the day I arrived, crowded with my uncle's clothes and furniture. The cellar, two dirt-floored rooms separated by a thin partition, each lit by a single bare 100-watt bulb that dangles from the unfinished ceiling. A furnace and an empty oil drum crowd one room; in the other, I find hand-cobbled shelves stocked with mason jars of moonshine. The barn is empty but for a gutted tractor and a rusted Ford F-150, its keys in the ignition. In the bed of the truck I find tools — a shovel, a hoe, an old-fashioned hand plow — and when I start the truck and take it over the first ridge, I discover the little plot he must have used to raise his vegetables. The upturned earth is red with clay — rocky, hard land for growing even vegetables, much less for farming.

The farm is not a working farm, hasn't been for years. I top off the pick-up from the diesel tank behind the barn and jolt over the rough pastures, feeling at home in the cab of the big truck. The lumpy seat is more comfortable than it looks. The pitted steering wheel feels right against my palms. Whatever Lucius Kemp might have been — other than the drinking man to whom the mason jars of everclear offer mute testimony — he wasn't much of a farmer. Except for the garden, this land hasn't been cultivated in years. Rabbits flee pell-mell across the ridges. Once I scare up a fox. It crouches atop a hillside and glares down at me in my truck. When it stalks away, it slides into the trees like a graceful shadow.

A vision of the man my uncle must have been starts to cohere in my

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mind. A man grim and spare as these mountains. His house empty of vanity or comfort, of decoration, unfinished but functional. Raw. I think of the woman in the picture, the woman who must have been my aunt. This life must have been a hard life for her. Her beauty, her softness — they do not square with the house she lived in or with the man who is forming in my mind.

And yet I find that I admire him, somehow. Admire his perseverance in wrenching an existence from such land.

One morning I start to work. In the common room, I prop the picture of my aunt over my sketchbook. I begin to block in her soft features, her eyes, but my interest in the project quickly pales. I move to the porch and try to sketch the lay of my uncle's farm.

Nothing.

Back inside, I sip coffee. I sit in a straight-backed kitchen chair, my hands flat against the table. Listening. That whispering has started up among the empty rooms and I am listening, straining now to make it out. After a while, I find that I have taken up the pencil, that on a fresh sheet I am sketching in the outlines of a face that is lean — or better, gaunt. A face hungry and unkind.

In the kitchen, the phone rings and rings.

The whisper keeps on, at the very edge of hearing, verging on subliminal. What it says, I cannot know.

The phone rings and rings.

Go to hell, Cynthia. I'm working.

At last the phone falls silent. I sketch and sketch, my coffee grown cold.

I am not alone here.

This the first thought that enters my mind when I wake late, well after dawn, after eight o'clock, after nine. My good work habits — the lifelong discipline of a man who has been self-employed since college — have vanished, evaporated in less than a week alone here. Oh I work, yes. I work when the spirit seizes me, as I eat and sleep and wake now. Today, I wake at 9:36 A.M. I gaze at the hands of the Big Ben alarm clock my uncle left on his night table. The long hand ticks forward a notch. 9:37.

And I am not alone.

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The thought presents itself, fully formed, in my mind — not the product of rational consideration, of logic or even evidence. Simply a feeling. An intuition.

I am not alone.

I sit up. Sheets and covers pool in my lap. I shrink within the soft flannel shirt I have stolen from my uncle's drawer, within his worn-out sweats. Listening.

And there it is. A sound from the common room — not the furtive, fearful rustle of a person trying to be silent, but the simple grace of a person gifted with quiet — a person who moves quietly not for a reason, but simply because that is the way she moves.

The way you move, though I could not know it then.

I dare not breathe. The silence and the isolation seem to close around me. Four days now without human contact, with just the arbitrary detonations of the phone. Four days in which I have seen no living creature but the birds, the rabbits, the predatory fox.

From the common room, I hear that sound once more, and now I recognize it. Someone is turning the pages of my sketchbook, flipping through it slowly and thoughtfully, with a pause to examine each of the penciled studies. Now I know what has jarred me from sleep: this familiar sound, only half-perceived.

I am not alone.

Cynthia, I think. Cynthia, I am sure. Cynthia, I tell myself as I throw back the covers and creep down the narrow hallway, silent myself, oh silent, creeping in my stocking feet. I am thinking: Cynthia. Godamnit, Cynthia.

But it is you.

I did not mean to startle you, and now, remembering, putting it all down — putting it down so I can make sense of it — now I know that I did not frighten you, that I could not. Could I?

But you turn with a little half-gasp, a hiss of in-drawn breath. You clutch at your breasts as if to show me how I scared you. You say, "Oh! You startled me!" And then, with a guilty glance at the sketchbook: "I mean I knew you were here because I saw your things. But I didn't expect — "

I am across the room without thought. I close the sketchbook firmly, as if to say: *You have no business. No right.* Is this how we are to

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communicate, like players in a silent film, with a series of flamboyant, wordless gestures?

"I made some fresh coffee," you say.

I say, "Who are you?"

Who are you? Who are you with your sad face and your housedress from three decades past, your old-fashioned apron, homemade from a flour sack? I can see the print heave along the shelf of your bosom (*Beeman's Best Self-Rising Flour*), the silver chain that dangles there, the hand-worked locket. I can see your long fingers, your bright nails, see you tremble as you steady yourself against the table. And what I want to know is: Who are you?

You say, "There's fresh coffee."

I can smell it.

Now that my heart has settled, now that I know you pose no danger, I am aware that the room is cold. Perhaps this is a harbinger of winter in these mountains. And so I add a stroke to that portrait of my uncle that has been taking shape inside my head: he was a man who could survive such winters. I think of him snowed in here, in his spartan home. I think of the ranked jars of moonshine on their basement shelf. I shiver with the cold.

"Coffee would be great," I say, and you can feel it palpably, the relief that floods the chill room, our mutual relief that despite the fact that we are strangers, despite the fact that you are standing in my uncle's home — in *my* home — without an invitation or a word of explanation — despite all, we have decided to be friends.

In the kitchen, I pour coffee into a cream-colored ceramic mug. The earthy smell draws me down into myself, out of the chill incorporeality of the room. The first sip plunges me into the absolute physical essence of my being. For the first time in days or maybe weeks, I seem to inhabit every cell of my body, and I realize suddenly that I have been walking around untethered from myself — my intellect as unconnected to my flesh as that of some disembodied brain in a third-rate science fiction movie — since first I became aware of Cynthia and her other man, since, for the first time, I was sure. A warm swell of appreciation rises within me, appreciation for this coffee and the woman who made it. I realize with a start that all this time that I have told myself I would not think of Cynthia,

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I have been thinking of nothing else. She has been down there in the abyss of my being, unacknowledged but shaping the flow of my thoughts, as influential and unseen as some fathoms-deep ocean current.

Hands cupped around the warm coffee mug, I return to the common room. I half expect you to have disappeared as swiftly and silently as you came, but there you are when I return, prim on the sagging sofa, your legs crossed at the knee. I pull a chair from under the table and sit down across from you.

"I'm sorry for frightening you."

"No, I'm sorry," you say. You nod at the sketchbook. "I didn't have any right, not without asking."

"As far as that goes, I might say you didn't have any right to be here at all."

"I didn't expect anyone to be here."

"You didn't notice the car?"

You glance down. I stare at the pink fissure of scalp where your dark hair parts in the middle and falls straight to your shoulders.

"You knew him, didn't you?"

"I knew him."

"Lucius," I say. Lucius, the mysterious Lucius Kemp. Who else? Who but an...intimate (what other word can I use?) would have a key to the house, would simply let themselves in, uninvited? And now I try to get a fix on your age, but it defies me. You might be twenty-five, you might be thirty-five. Certainly no older. But too young, I think, too young by far for the man I've begun to flesh out in my imagination — the man who was married to the woman in the photograph, surely no less than thirty years ago and probably more.

"Luke," you say. "That's what I called him."

"You knew each other for a long time." Then it comes to me: your youth, his age, your presence in this room. The key. "You worked for him, didn't you? Cleaned for him, looked after him?"

"I should go," you say. You stand and reach into a pocket beneath your apron. "I'll return the key. I'm sorry to disturb you."

I stand, my hand outstretched. "Please, no, it's okay. I want to know about my uncle, I want to know about...Lucius." I cannot bring myself to call him Luke.

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"Maybe you could clean the place for me..." I hesitate, the way you do.

"Emily," you say.

"Emily. And I'm David. I'll pay you, Emily — whatever he paid you, what do you say? Keep the key, all right?"

"Fine, then," you say, and I see you for what you really are: poor. I think of the darkened houses I saw as I drove in. I think of the weary store and gas station, the only business I saw for twenty miles or more, and I *know* that you are poor, that everyone in this area is poor, and that you must be glad for the work. I even admire you a little — the easy way you have of saying, "Fine, then," and preserving thus your pride, as though it doesn't matter, when work, any kind of work, must matter very much.

I reach for the photo I've propped on the table, the woman and her soft-focus old-fashioned beauty, and this is what I say:

"This woman — do you know who she is?"

But it's like I haven't said a word. You turn away, you gaze out the window into the gray fall morning, you don't even answer.

EMILY. Emily Clark.

Such a simple name, so prosaic, and yet when you are gone, departing as silently and mysteriously as you came, I am left with nothing but mystery. For an hour, two hours, three I have accomplished nothing. I follow as you move about these quarters that need no dusting or sweeping or straightening. This house is almost monastic in its order and simplicity — without flourish, or vanity, or decoration.

Another stroke added to my mental portrait of this man I did not, could not know. Flesh of my flesh. Blood of my blood. Family.

"Who was Lucius Kemp?" I ask you.

You shrug. You say, "He could be a nice man," leaving unspoken the obvious corollary to such a statement: Most times he wasn't.

That's it. Nothing else. You move about with a kind of self-sufficient internal repose, as if there's nothing more to say.

Down the hall and through the second bedroom, across into the master bedroom, back through the common room, into the kitchen, and down the hall again — like heavenly spheres, predestinate in orbits laid

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out for them by scientific law, that is how we move, in endless circuit about these silent rooms. There is nothing for you to clean. I see that now.

We stare out of windows, exchange a few words, small hesitant smiles, and I think: *You are lying to me.* There is nothing for you to clean, there never was, this house is like a barracks: my uncle possessed a sense of order military in its precision. Perhaps I *should* let you go. There is no work for you to do here. But you knew him, that's what I'm thinking. You knew him.

The money isn't much to me. The company, maybe, is.

Now we are in the bedroom. Do I imagine it, or do you too feel the tension that stands triangulated here between us: me, leaning in the doorway; and you, there by the window, gazing out; the bed between us, rumpled and unmade? Natural tension, so I think, between a lonely man and an attractive woman. Do you feel it? Do you?

"Where do you live?" I say, just to be saying something.

"Not too far from here." You do not turn from the window. You lift your hand and gesture vaguely at the driveway and all that lies beyond it. Toward the whole world.

The phone, then. The ring blasts through the silent house, startling me, but you do not flinch, you do not turn your head.

I wait, hoping it will ring only once or twice, hoping it will stop. Please stop.

The phone rings and rings, shrill, insistent, senseless as the buzzsaw of cicadas on a blistered summer day.

"I'll get it," I say, as though you made some gesture to move for the phone yourself, though of course you haven't.

In the kitchen, I lift the receiver from its cradle, annoyed that I should be interrupted, though what exactly I believe has been interrupted it's hard for me to say. I do not realize that I am more than annoyed until I hear the anger in my voice. "Goddamnit, Cynthia, I thought I asked you not to call for a while. Can you just for a day or two, just that long, can you just please leave me alone?"

I stop, gasping. At the other end, a woman speaks. Not Cynthia, but Susan, my agent. I have a sense of women all about me, entrapping me, enwebbing me in their demands. You stand apart from them, silent in the

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bedroom, self-contained, gazing expressionlessly into the dark clouds that just this morning have begun to mass atop the ridges. As Susan speaks, a very clear image of you forms in my mind, an image of you standing by the window, face turned to the impassive sky.

Susan says, "David, are you ready to forego this nonsense?"

"No."

"Everyone is trying to reach you. I have been. Cynthia. Your lawyer."

"I'm incommunicado," I say. I like the way it sounds.

"Spare me this crap," she says. "Can you do that? We're all worried sick. Cynthia's half-crazed. She thinks we're going to find you in a tub of tepid water, hacking at your wrists with a butter knife. She's driving everybody nuts. So can you please spare me this crap?"

"Fine."

I turn to gaze out the kitchen window at the ramshackle barn, the color of a day-old corpse. Grass slants sere and brown out of the dead earth. Beyond the bright tin of the roof, clouds gather like divisions of gray-faced soldiers. A quick image of Susan's Manhattan office seizes me: cluttered and busy and lined with the art of people more famous and more talented than I am. I could be a million miles from that place. I could be in an entirely different universe.

Susan says: "What the hell is going on, David?"

"I'm retired. I'm going to try to paint."

She makes a noise that is not nice. "I don't know what your deal with Cynthia is and I don't want to know, but this is ridiculous."

"Whatever you say."

"This crap has to stop. I've been putting my ass on the line for you all week now. I don't know how much longer I can stall the people at Bantam. I've given them deaths in the family, I've given them bleeding ulcers, I've even given them the truth. And I don't know what else to give them. They want to see your ideas and frankly, David, they deserve to, because they paid for them. *Comprendé*? They paid for them."

"So what?"

"So what? It's called a career, David, and pardon me for being blunt, but if you don't stop fucking around with yours, you're going to find yourself trying to remember when you used to have one."

I lean my head against the refrigerator, and the iced surface is like a

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cool and soothing hand laid across a feverish brow. I do not say a word. Susan continues in the same vein for a time, and when she is done, I say very calmly and as kindly as I know how:

"I'm not doing the covers. It's that simple. I'm...not...doing...them." I say it very slowly and clearly, without heat, but with long stretches of silence between each syllable, the way you say things to children and foreigners, as if by slowing down, you can make them understand. Then I say, "I'm sorry, I really am. But I'm not doing them. Tell them whatever you have to tell them. Tell them I'll return the money and I will. But I'm not doing them. Okay?"

"What's going on, David?" she asks. "What *are* you doing?"

"Art," I say, and maybe that's what I really intend. I don't know myself, and I certainly don't know what to say to her. "Real art."

And she says, with a note of genuine compassion in her voice, "For Christ's sake, David, you're not an artist: You're an illustrator. A damned good one, but only an illustrator. Haven't you realized that yet?" Then, very gently and before I can reply, as if I would know how to, she hangs up on me.

I stand there, the phone cradled between my ear and shoulder and my forehead propped against the chill surface of the refrigerator, until I trigger an automated recording somewhere in the belly of the phone system. "If you would like to make a call — "

I drop the receiver so that it swings in long parabolas at the end of its cord and walk into the common room.

"Emily," I say. And louder, "Emily!"

Nothing. Nothing but that unique and watchful stillness that comes over an empty house. Just nothing. Knowing that it's useless, but unable to help myself, I walk through the house and then I walk through it again. And you are nowhere to be found. You are nowhere.

I did not hear you leave, I did not hear a car start. I see you in my mind, then, I see you walking down the long drive on foot, walking home, too poor even to own or drive a car, and something of the magnitude of your poverty is visited upon me. For a moment, I finger my keys. I study the slim, shiny key to my Acura and the dull, blunt key to my uncle's pick-up, which really, now that I consider it, I suddenly prefer to drive. And then I think about poverty and the pride I sensed within you, and I know

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that if I should start down the long drive and find you and offer you a ride, you very likely will be too humiliated ever to return.

I want you to come back. I hardly know you, but I want you to come back. Soon.

I sit down at the table and gaze at the photo of the woman who must have been my aunt, but all I can think about is Emily Clark, all I can think about is you. You and the questions you never answered. You and the questions I did not ask, some simple and some too complex for words. Like: Who is Lucius Kemp? Like: Is it possible to fall in love with a woman you do not even know?

Until this moment, I have not believed in love, not love as in a book or movie. Not love that can launch a thousand ships.

But one thing I do not consider, though now it occurs to me that perhaps I should have: why, spiking through this lucid passion that has possessed me, is my rage and anger at Cynthia — Cynthia and her little man — like a razor wire heated to a white-hot incandescence? Why?

This I do not consider.

After a while, it occurs to me that I should work. That I should begin the task of proving, to myself at least, that I am more than an illustrator.

But first, I stalk once more through this house. I make my way from room to room in irritable compass, like a prisoner in his cell, or a lion in his cage.

And that is when I notice: You have gone, your work done for the day, but you have left my bed unmade.

The next morning I wake up and dress in my uncle's clothes. There is no washing machine, everything I brought is dirty, and as I root through his drawers for something to wear I cannot help but wonder: Did you wash his clothes for him? Then this prosaic question is eclipsed by awe: in the back corner of a bottom drawer, stuffed under a paint-stained sweater, I find a dusty velvet box, and in the box, I find a ring.

A diamond ring.

My fingers tremble as I lift it to the window. Clouds have continued to gather overnight — like a metal plate clamped atop the ridges, impermeable as the lid of a pressure cooker — but what light there is, the diamond shatters into a thousand shards, so that for a moment, as I shift

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the ring, searching out its flaws, the dim room is transformed by slow-turning luminescence.

As for flaws, there are none.

Possibilities unfold from this seed. Whose ring was this? The woman in the photo? Another woman yet unknown to me? What prosaic tragedies shaped my uncle's existence? I think, fingering the ring.

Or, I think, maybe it is yours.

These possibilities whirl in my thoughts as I place the ring by the photo in the common room. Another question for you. Another mystery only you can solve.

Then I settle in to work. The house is whispering to me again, a voice faint and faraway, undecipherable, but compelling. Whispering, whispering, whispering. I am not alone here, and yet I do not fear. All day in the common room, I labor over the painting. Listen and labor, hesitantly reaching out to daub a little gray onto the clean canvas, a little brown, a little black. That face. That lean and hungry face.

Later, when the copper coin of the sun, without heat or light, has fallen from the sky and only darkness wells beyond the windows, the phone begins to ring. I put aside my brushes and listen as it rings.

Cynthia, I think. Oh, Cynthia, Cynthia.

But I do not answer.

Silence then. In the stillness, I take up a pencil and start to doodle in my sketchbook. The long curve of a cheek that will not come. The shine of your eyes. And this is what I learn: I do not know what you look like. I cannot remember what you look like.

It disturbs me. Maybe you'll come, I think. Maybe you'll come.

I resolve to wait.

You do not come.

When I wake, you are there. In the common room I find you, the velvet ring box open on the table before you, the picture of my aunt now turned away.

"Emily?" I say. "Emily?"

Without turning, you gesture at the painting on its easel.

"That's him," you say. "That's Lucius Kemp. You know him after all."

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Him. That lean face, those hungry eyes. Good God, I think. Good God. I am thinking of the woman in the photo, her soft curves, her gentle beauty. I am thinking: he must have eaten her alive. He must have devoured her.

"Who is the woman?" I say. "Who is the woman in the photo?"

But you do not answer.

The look in your eyes when you turn to me is like no look I've ever seen before. You do not speak. I am not prepared for what follows: you stand and your fury drives me back, down the hall and into the bedroom and the rumpled bed, the sheets like soft arms reaching.

I am not prepared for your chill beauty as wordless we come together, like animals in rut —

— *like Cynthia*, some deranged part of my mind babbles, *like Cynthia* —

— and this thought just makes it stronger, stranger, sweeter.

"Emily," I say. "Emily, Emily, Emily."

You do not speak. Your body is beautiful but icy, icy cold — cold from the long walk you've made to get here, so cold that I cannot chafe the blood into your flesh. From now on I will drive you, I think. From now on I will drive you.

And then there is no thinking. Just the vision of your beauty moving over me, that locket swinging there between your ivory breasts.

Afterward, we talk — or *I* talk. Whatever secrets you possess you hold fast within yourself. But I, I share my lies: I am a painter, I am not married. Lies, all lies. I'm sorry for the lies.

Then sleep, and when I wake, I find that you are gone.

Gone.

All day, and then another day, waiting, and still you do not come.

A few flakes of snow drift from the gun-metal sky, but the storm holds off, burgeoning. Outside, the wind is cutting and chill, but the clouds do not move; grim and implacable they lour above this barren farm, this bowl among the steep and ugly hills, this inheritance.

No work today. I cannot bear to look at the unfinished painting. I cannot bear to touch it. One thing I know, however: It is magnificent. Like nothing I have ever done or will ever do again.

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It lives.

At noon, the phone starts its incessant buzzing. I reach to unplug it, but then desist. I like the sound of it — of her, Cynthia — echoing helpless among these empty rooms. Let her worry about me for a change. Let her wonder about me.

Then, at last, it stops.

I wait.

The phone does not ring again.

Eight o'clock. Nine o'clock. And still you do not come.

Down the wooden steps, in the cellar, I pluck a jar of moonshine from the shelf, spin loose the rusty lid. The sharp odor of cheap alcohol washes out at me as I tip the jar to my lips. It tastes awful, like a rat had drowned in the still that brewed it. Bitter, awful, burning stuff — but balm to soothe me nonetheless. Oh, yes. So I tilt the jar to my lips again, I take another sip, and that is when I see it, shoved back in the spidery darkness at the rear of the shelf. Not shoved there and forgotten. Hidden. *Hidden*, though how I know this I cannot say.

Hidden, I think.

And then I realize that I'm not thinking it at all. I'm hearing it. Hearing it whispered from the shadows at the corners of the room, from the low and looming ceiling where the naked light bulb swings, from the very walls, breathing out from them. *Hidden.*

Icy fingers stir the hairs at the back of my neck.

Who is the whisperer in the house?

I tilt the mason jar to my lips once more. "For courage," I say, and I say it aloud. I won't be silenced. I won't be fearful. Not here. Not in my own house.

I'm damned if I will.

I swish the moonshine around in my mouth, my taste buds stunned insensible by the foulness of the stuff. Then I lift my hand, extend it into the cobwebs at the back of the shelf, and pluck it forth:

An envelope, gone yellow now with age. It must have been white once, lacy. Scalloped edges, a mucus-stain of glue around its unsealed flap. My fingers slide along the paper, slick and cheap, pretty in a girlish way — the kind of stationery that might appeal to a country girl hungry for beauty, purchased in a dime store, hoarded like a miser's gold. I lift it to

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my nostrils, inhale that scent which should not, could not have survived, that ghost of a scent, that cheap perfume, this too the kind of thing a girl might buy.

Another swig of moonshine, and then I put the open jar on the shelf.

There in the dank cellar, I lift the torn flap and slip out a page of the same slick paper, once crumpled as if in anger, now smoothed flat. My fingers shake as I unfold it. Words sprawl across the page in a close untutored hand:

It aint right what we did. Its sinful. I can't stand the way folks look at me, I know how they whisper. I heard when Mr. Wright told you he couldn't have a girl like me in school no more. You shaking your head saying you don't know how to handle me, saying I won't tell you who the daddy is. I hate you Lucius Kemp, I won't ever ever forgive you what you done to me and if Daddy was alive he'd hate you to. I'm glad Em took the baby, I did it just to spite you. You'll never be able to do it the way you done me. She'll find someone to see its taken care of. When you find this I'll be gone and I'm not ever coming back but I told her what you done. You see if she ever marries you now, you see if she

The letter breaks off, unfinished. But he found it, didn't he, and finding, read it? The whole house is whispering now, and this is what it tells me: he found it and he read it and he crushed it between his callused palms. In his rage. His fury. I can feel his fury in this room.

The date at the top reads November 4, 1961. Not more than a week after my birthday.

I can see them in my mind, his gaunt and hungry face, and her face too, the face in the photograph, that softly vulnerable beauty. More like a girl's than like a woman's. Mother. Father.

Oh mother, I am thinking.

Dear god, how I hope that you escaped him.

How long I stand there, I do not know.

Finally I come to myself, her letter, my mother's letter, crushed in my hand, and when I do, I reach out and grasp the jar of moonshine and tilt it

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to my lips. Up the stairs then, into the night house. The fire has died to embers. That chill is in the room. When I shut off the light and step to the window I see that the snow has started at last. It comes down in swift, tiny flakes, like grains of salt or rice. I can hear them ticking against the window. I can see them piling up out there, burying the farm.

I find the phone numbers in my wallet: home and office. *Let me know if you need anything,* he had said. *Feel free to call.* It's after eleven, too late to ring him up, but I do it anyway, punching out the number in the dull copper wash of light over the kitchen sink. I have to know.

The phone rings and rings. He's old. I give him time.

"Hello?" His old man's voice.

"Mr. Borden?"

"Hello? Who's this?

"Mr. Borden, it's me. David Nicholls, you remember? Lucius Kemp's..." How can I bring myself to say it? "Lucius Kemp's nephew."

"Sure," he says. "I remember. Kind of late, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry about that. I need to talk."

"I see," he says.

Silence then, waiting. I reach out and switch off the light, liking the dark, and the way the snow blurs past the window, and how the wind sounds mournful in the hollows.

"I haven't slept too good in years," he says. "I reckon I got time to talk. You doing all right up there?"

"Fine." I tip the mason jar to my throat. Like drinking rubbing alcohol, like drinking gas. "Fine."

"You don't sound too good."

"Just watching the snow."

He snorts. "I hope you're well-provisioned, son. This front's supposed to dump a foot or more. Three, four days maybe, 'fore the plows make it up that way."

"I'll be okay." Another taste of moonshine. I can feel it coursing through my veins. I close my eyes. I say, "Mr. Borden, how well did you know my...my uncle?"

"Gosh, I don't know. Since I was a boy, I guess. I did all his legal work for thirty years or more. He never told me he was looking for you, though."

"Why do you think he was?"

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"Don't know. He never talked about that. Never mentioned you nor Katie Ellen much. He didn't have any family, though. Maybe he just got to feeling lonely." He pauses, and when he says, "That happens to old folks, I guess," I get the sense he's speaking from experience.

"Katie Ellen?"

"Your mother," he says. "Luke's sister, you know."

"Do you know who my father was?" I ask. But I know myself.

Oh, I know. I know the worst of it. I open my eyes, intending now to face it, and beyond the window the snow is blurring faster than it has blurred before, and when I touch my face, what I feel is tears.

Borden sighs. "Naw. People didn't talk about such things in those days. A pregnant woman who wasn't married — well, you just didn't talk about it outside of blood. I don't know for sure if your uncle ever knew who your daddy was, but I expect he didn't. If he had a known, I think he probably would a killed him."

It's all I can do not to laugh aloud at the irony of this: Lucius Kemp not knowing who my father was. As if he didn't own a mirror.

"What happened to Katie Ellen?" I say.

"She gave you up for adoption, of course. There wasn't anything else she could do back then, not in these parts, anyway. After that she stuck around for just a week or two, and then she up and left. People talk, you know, and she got plumb tired of listening. That was a hard year for your mother, a hard year for your uncle, too. He never talked about it, but you could tell it hurt him."

"He never married?"

"Naw. Almost, once, but...He never married. Lived alone up there, worked just hard enough to make ends meet. Just drank his home-brewed whiskey and brooded. Your uncle was not a happy man."

"How did he die?"

"I think you know," he says.

"Tell me anyway."

"Hung himself. Out in the barn. He hung there three weeks before a fellow found him. Fellow had gone up to see about a broke-down tractor Luke had talked about selling."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, hell, son, I didn't see any need for you to know."

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Another silence then, a long, uneasy one, as if he knows he should have told me this, and perhaps he does.

At last he says, "I need to get some sleep. Old bones, you know. Why don't you call me in a day or two? We'll talk."

"Wait a minute. There's one more thing."

"What's that?"

"Emily Clark," I say. "You ever hear of a woman named Emily Clark?"

"Where'd you hear that name, son?"

"Who is she?"

"That was the woman your uncle was set to marry. She left about the same time as your mother. Nobody ever heard anything from her either. Like I said, it was a hard year for your uncle. I don't believe he ever got over it."

I do not know what sound it is that I have made, but I can feel it in my throat. Caught there. Like some small and fearful creature.

"Mr. Nicholls? Are you okay?"

I do not say a word.

Just then a white glare floods the kitchen. Outside the window, each snowflake catches fire, like a storm of swarming meteors. I cannot speak for the choking horror that rises up inside me. I wheel around, clutching the phone in one white-knuckled hand, and stare out through the doorway into the common room. Outside the windows there burn the lights of an approaching car. I can hear the sound of its tires spinning in the snow, its engine racing.

"Mr. Nicholls," Simon Borden says. "Just what the hell have you gotten yourself into up there?"

I do not answer. With nerveless fingers, I rack the phone. By the time I reach the porch, the driver has cut the engine. The headlights still burn, like searchlights through the storm. I can see nothing, no one, only the lights. A car door opens. My heart seizes up inside me. The bitter stench of scorched rubber hangs like hatred in the air.

I cannot stop myself. I'm calling out your name like a man who's lost or drowning, seeking solace as the black waters close above my head.

"Emily!" I am calling. "Emily! Emily! Emily!"

* * *

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It's not you. Of course it couldn't be. The syllables of your name die in my throat as I watch a figure emerge from the car, moving uncertainly across the broken, icy ground. The storm spits and swirls. The figure stops before the car, backlit by the headlights, its shadow grasping through the swirling fog of snow.

The figure says, "David? Is that you?"

Christ. Cynthia.

"What are you doing here?" I say. "I told you not to come."

"Is that you?"

"Of course it is. Who else would it be?"

"It doesn't look like you," she says.

And perhaps it doesn't: Here I stand in another man's warm flannel, on the porch of another man's house, looking at a woman who should have been the wife of another man. The one she left me for.

She bends to adjust her shoe. "Damn storm," she says. "I didn't think I was going to make it. It's freezing out here."

Cynthia says, "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Come in, Cynthia."

I turn without looking back. Inside, I throw a log on the fire, jab at it with the poker. Sparks swirl up the flue. A few tongues of flame lick out of the coals. The headlights go out abruptly, the car door shuts with a thunk. I am waiting for her. Waiting here, a jar of moonshine in my hand, the smell of the fire tickling in my nostrils.

She enters with a gust of snow, the door swinging away from her to bang against the wall. Her bag hits the floor with a thunk. She shucks her long black coat, and she's wearing heels, loose silk pants that flare at the ankles, a peasant blouse. All black and accented with lots of silver jewelry: a silver herringbone chain, a silver pin in the shape of a Halloween cat over her left breast, lots of silvery bangles that tinkle musically on her thin wrists. When she turns to slam the door, I see she's angry. I can see it in the rigid line of her shoulders and her dark hair flying loose about her face. I can see it in her thin cheeks, flushed with more than cold.

"Jesus Christ, David," she says. "You could at least give me a hand."

"Shut up," I say. "You shut the hell up. Nobody asked you to come here."

She recoils, a new expression rising into her face.

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I have never spoken to her this way before — her or any woman. I can feel the rage coiling in my guts like uneasy serpents. I take a drink of the moonshine and place the jar atop the table. I fetch a jelly glass from the kitchen and dump three fingers of everclear into the bottom.

She is gazing at the portrait when I return.

"Well, I have to stay now," she says. "Until the storm breaks anyway."

"You shouldn't have come."

"I was worried about you. You could have answered the phone!"

"I told you not to call."

She turns away, circling warily. I'm watching her, the long lines of her body beneath her clothes, her eyes as they rove and index, checking off the contents of the room: the furniture, cheap but serviceable, the cramped quarters, and the rough-hewn floor below the easel, spattered now with careless drops of paint. She pauses for a moment when she sees the letter and the photograph, and her eyes widen when she sees the ring, but she decides not to mention it. I can see the decision forming in the narrow folds of her eyes and the set of her lips, and I know that I will hear about it later.

"I'm sorry," she says finally. "Sorry for coming, I didn't know what else to do. I can't sleep or eat, I can't work or even think. I've been worried sick." She lifts the jelly glass of moonshine from the table, sniffs it warily, and puts it down. "What *is* this stuff?"

"Don't drink it if you don't want it."

"Can you just quit it, please?"

"Are you still fucking him?"

"David, quit it, okay?"

We sit there for a time, listening to the storm outside. The fire spits and crackles. I sip at my mason jar, feeling the moonshine zipping through my blood.

"Cold in here," Cynthia says.

I can feel it, too: a cold deeper than mere cold, a numbness that creeps beneath the skin and ices up the bones. A cold like no cold I have ever felt until I came here, no natural cold. If the furnace worked, if the whole damned house was burning, that cold would linger.

But all I say is: "I didn't think to order oil." And this, too, is true.

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Cynthia shivers.

"Drink the moonshine," I say, "it'll warm you up a little."

She picks up the glass and sips at it, her nose wrinkling. After a while, she starts to speak. "I just want you to know I love you," she says, and I am thinking:

Oh, Emily, Emily.

I am thinking of you.

She says, "I had to come, I had to let you know. I ended it, David. I told him I wouldn't see him anymore, I told him that I love you and that I had made a mistake. I told him the truth. I told him that I love you, that I was going to see if it wasn't too late to save the bond we used to have. I want to save it, if we can. I want you to come home. It doesn't feel right at home without you."

She says this without looking at me. She says it with her eyes averted, with her face averted; she expels the words in brief staccato bursts between her in-drawn breaths, like an actress reeling lines she's memorized but doesn't have much feeling for. It has the ring of falsity, of a speech constructed and memorized during a long drive, which she has undertaken for reasons she does not even know herself. Just lies, more lies.

And I am thinking: Emily, Emily.

Finished, Cynthia meets my gaze at last, an expectant look on her face. I see her through a haze — as through an ice-rimed window or a rust-stained mirror.

"As soon as the roads are clear," I say, "I want you to leave."

I take another long drink of moonshine, the wide-mouthed jar nearly empty now. I can feel it burning into me, fueling my resentment and my rage.

Cynthia stares at me, her mouth open, as I lever myself out of my chair. The room wheels around me vertiginously as I move past her to the hall. For a moment, I am afraid I will be sick, and then the feeling passes. Cynthia catches me at the door to the master bedroom, and there I turn to her, waving her away vaguely, breathing out my fumes at her, saying hatefully and without remorse:

"You leave me alone. You go to hell."

I wrench loose from her and move to the bed.

She's saying, "David, please — "

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But she's saying it from very far away. I see her up there, far away, see her mouth moving, but I can't hear the words she's saying, and then the soiled bed —

— *Emily* —

— reaches up to catch me, and I can't see a thing.

IN THE NIGHT she comes to me, as I suppose I knew she would. Her way, her weakness, her passage out of loneliness.

Cynthia, oh Cynthia, inconstant as the moon.

I forgive you, I forgive you now.

When she comes the room beats with a strange and molten light, the light of storm and radiant snow, raining out of night and blackness and beating back the dark with its unearthly glow. What wakes me I do not know, but there she is, without a stitch of clothing, moving toward me so soundlessly the hinges of her body might be oiled, the light agleam and playful along the smooth facets of her body and her flesh, like silken steel beneath my reaching fingers.

Thick-headed with booze, stunned by sleep, I rise up to meet her. Now, after all that I have said, all the unforgivable words, I embrace her. I take what solace she can offer.

Warm. So warm.

And sometime in the middle of her wordless cries, I too am speaking — whispering aloud in a voice tremulous with love and need, like a prayer or invocation: "*Emily, Emily.*"

I can sense you in the room.

Through my slitted eyes, I can see you in the doorway looking on.

I can *feel* you, your presence: beyond the light or the cold or the warm imperative of Cynthia beneath me.

"Emily," I say. "Emily."

Now Cynthia is speaking, saying, "What? *Who*?" I can feel the anger in her voice, the self-righteous anger she has no right to.

Like the dank waters of a poisoned well, the rage boils out of me.

"*Who*?" Cynthia hisses. "What did you say? *Who*?"

She claws at me, scrabbling at the sheets, trying to get away.

Another glance then, at you, you, Emily, waiting, watchful from the

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door, and I am on her. My fingers too can claw. My fingers grasp and squeeze.

For you. For you.

I clutch her in her throes, I clasp her to me. I will have her. I will have what he has had and more.

Afterward, darkness closes around me, swift and certain. Dreams haunt me: this house of whispers, a lonely stretch of interstate, an on-looming truck. When I wake, the storm has passed. The light in the room is the bright warm light of morning sun, a thousand times reflected by a blanket of new-fallen snow. And now I remember, I remember it all: how Cynthia came to me in the night, what happened afterward. I am sure that it is just another dream. But when I roll over, when I reach out my hand, my fingers fall on flesh that's cold and dead.

Flesh like your flesh, Emily.

This is what I do:

In the barn, I fetch my father's shovel from the bed of the pick-up. I cannot dig a grave through snow and half-frozen ground, and if I could, I dare not risk it: the long, hungry months have commenced, and surely some predatory beast would dig her up, and devour her. Perhaps the fox. Back then, across the bright frozen wasteland of the yard, back to the house, where I wrap Cynthia in sheets. She has begun to stiffen. Her flesh is blue and cold, her arms and legs refuse to unfold, and when I lug her into the cellar, I am half-amazed at how weighty and inert her slim body has become.

I am fighting back the tears, though whether they are tears of grief or fear I cannot say. I am thinking of you, Emily.

I am thinking of you as the shovel bites into the dusty floor; thinking of you with each spadeful of dry, remorseless earth; thinking of you when I clamber from the grave to open a jar of moonshine and slake my weary thirst.

Emily. Emily Clark.

The house seems to whisper your name. I can hear it in the creaking joists and in the roof, complaining under its load of autumn snow. Down here it is cold, cold. Even the moonshine doesn't warm me, even the work, the hard, hard work of digging Cynthia's grave.

How long I labor there, I cannot say. I lose myself in the work, all

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practical considerations flee before its grim imperative. When the blade of the shovel clangs against something hard, I am drawn back to myself, to the cellar, to the grave, which I have made large and wide and deep. A single bone protrudes from the earth.

Other bones then, many of them, too many. I cannot identify them, but I know they are human. The skulls confirm it: two of them, narrow and yellow with ensconcing earth, staring blind and mute at the raftered ceiling.

And something else.

I drop the shovel and pluck it from its bed of earth. A gleaming silver trinket, a hand-worked locket. I know where I saw it last: swinging in the hollow between your ivory breasts.

With my work-grimed fingers I pry it open to stare, hip deep in the earth of your grave, at the photos within. Two photos: the first, a grim black and white studio shot of the man in the portrait upstairs, my father, Lucius Kemp; the second also a studio shot, of a woman I can only vaguely recognize, but whom I know.

You, Emily. You.

How you have endured it all these years — trapped here in the house of the man who murdered you — how you have stood it, I cannot say. Spirits linger. Might not they too be driven to madness and revenge?

How it happened, I cannot say with any certainty. I have my suspicions, my intimations.

Who are you, Lucius Kemp?

I think I know. I fear I am my father's son.

After he raped my mother, his sister, after I was born and spirited away, he came upon her, didn't he? Found the letter even as she wrote it, and in his rage he murdered her. And you, Emily, you must have had your suspicions then, after everything my mother told you. So you came to him, perhaps you came *upon* him, even, as he buried her in her cellar grave. And so he killed you too. Perhaps he did it when you came to return his diamond to him.

Long years you waited for your revenge. Did you drive him to his hangman's noose?

I can't know for sure. I cannot say.

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But you took me in my weakness, didn't you? Out of my despair and need you shaped yourself, you clothed yourself in the flesh of my desire. The sin of the father, visited upon the son. That's how it must have been.

To think I loved you. To think I love you still.

The snow is melting. The mercury in the thermometer on my father's porch has begun to creep upward. The storm is past.

The phone rings and rings — though who it is I can only guess. Susan, maybe. Simon Borden perhaps. It doesn't matter. Soon someone will come looking. Maybe they'll read this, though it is not for them that I have written it. I wrote it for myself, Emily. I wrote it for you.

But you are gone. Your spirit has fled this house, those bones. I feel nothing of you. Not your mystery, or your icy presence, the chill of long years in the grave, hungry for the strength of living flesh to incarnate your rage. Nothing. Even the whispers have fallen silent.

What is left?

Just me. Just the house my father built and furnished in his comfortless fashion. Just this photo, this ring, this letter — relics of a story I did not want to know and do not want to remember. The presence of my father breathes out from these meager possessions, breathes out at me from the very walls of this house. In getting to know Lucius Kemp — in that, at least, I succeeded. And in getting to know myself.

But at what price?

For two guilt-haunted days I have awaited your return. In vain, of course, I understand that now. You've passed on wherever spirits pass to, your purpose here accomplished.

What else remains for me to do?

I will burn these things. The photograph. The letter. The ring too, though fire will only blacken it.

And then I will walk down into the cellar, to the grave in the cellar. I dug it wide, I dug it deep. My mother awaits me there. My wife. There, atop my bed of bones, pressed close against Cynthia's icy flesh, I will open my mouth and slide in the cold barrel of the revolver I found in my father's closet. I will pull the trigger, Emily, end this passage of my life and start anew.

I am coming, Emily. I am coming. ☙

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